THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

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APRIL 1951

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 2, No. 2 APRIL, 1951

Interloper	*by* POUL ANDERSON	3
More Than Skin Deep	*by* L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP & FLETCHER PRATT	23
The Last Séance	*by* AGATHA CHRISTIE	29
The Devil Was Sick	*by* BRUCE ELLIOTT	41
Through Channels	*by* RICHARD MATHESON	49
? ($100 Title Contest Story)	*by* IDRIS SEABRIGHT	55
The Mathematical Voodoo	*by* H. NEARING, JR.	61
Extending the Holdings	*by* DAVID GRINNELL	75
Miss Frost	*by* CHRISTOPHER WOOD	78
The Other End	*by* R. ELLIS ROBERTS	88
The Hill	*by* GEORGE PAUL ELLIOTT	104
Recommended Reading	*by* THE EDITORS	110
Narapoia	*by* ALAN NELSON	114
Larroes Catch Meddlers	*by* MANLY WADE WELLMAN	119

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Interloper

by POUL ANDERSON

THE SPACEBOAT slipped down, slowly and stealthily on its gravitic beams, toward the sea which rolled restlessly under the moon. For a moment the broken moonlight seemed to spread outward in little ripples of cold fire, then the boat had gone beneath the water surface.

It struck bottom not far down, for the beach was only half a mile distant, and lay there wrapped in darkness. Briefly, there was no movement or sound. Then the outer airlock valve opened and Beoric swam to the surface.

The night was vast and dark around him. He saw with complete clarity, in the thin fickle moonlight, but he could not make out any living thing. Sea and sky and the shadowy shoreline — momentarily, the thought of what must be waiting for him was utterly daunting, his heart felt cold in his breast, in all the centuries of his life he had never been so alone. He felt something of the ultimate loneliness of death.

A thought slipped into his mind, cool and unhuman as the sea depths from which it rose: *The creature is waiting. He has been waiting for an hour or more, in the shadows under the trees.*

Beoric's answering thought was a reaction of near panic: *Don't! They may be able to detect us, after all —*

In all the thousands of years, they have given no sign of being responsive to our special wave band. It is, of course, best not to take chances, not to communicate directly with you oftener than necessary. But we will be listening to your thoughts all the time.

You are not alone. The new thought came from the shore, somewhere behind

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the line of trees under which the alien waited. *We are with you, Beoric.*

It heartened him immensely. Whatever came, whatever happened — he was not altogether alone. Though all the powers of the universe be ranged against him, he had a few on his side. But — so few!

He struck out for the shore, swimming with long easy strokes that seemed to ride the waves. The moon-whitened beach came nearer, until he was wading through the shallows and up onto dry ground.

The creature who had been waiting stirred in the shadows. Beoric's night-seeing eyes swept over the gross black bulk of him, and for another moment fear was cold along his own spine. But — it was too late now. Even had he wanted to back out, after the long centuries of which this night might be the culmination, it was too late.

He ran across the beach and ducked behind a tree, as if he hoped the creature had not seen him. And he sent his thoughts probing forth at the mind of the other, as if he were trying to detect whether the thing were intelligent or not. If it should be a member of the dominant race here, the next logical step would be to seize control of its brain and —

The defensive reaction was so swift and savagely strong that Beoric's own mind reeled. For an instant his head swam, he seemed to be sinking into an illimitable darkness — almost, the thing had control of him! Then his nervous energy surged back, he threw a hard shield about his brain and sent a thought stabbing along the universally detectable wave band:

"Apparently your race has mastered the secrets of telepathy. If you are that far advanced, you will probably be able to guess my origin."

"Not guess — know!" The answering thought shivered violently in his brain. There must be an incredible force housed in that great scaly body. Beoric caught overtones of a dark amusement: "I thought at first you must be one of the natives — your appearance is almost identical — but obviously you are not."

"Then — you don't belong here — either?"

"Of course not. Wherever you are from, it must be from quite a distance or we would have encountered your people before. But your initial reaction to my presence suggests that you are used to the concept and techniques of visiting someone else's planet."

"I am." In the closed circle of his private thoughts, Beoric felt a sudden harsh laughter of his own. Indeed he was! "But I had not expected to find other — guests — on this world."

He stepped out into the open. The moonlight gleamed coldly on his wet, waterproof tunic and kilts. His strange slant eyes, all cloudy blue without pupil or white, roved into the darkness where the monster still crouched. "Come out," he invited. "Come out and bid me welcome."

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"Of course." The squat, enormously thick creature waddled out and stood under the moon. His blank reptilian eyes glittered as they swept over Beoric. Instinctively, the newcomer cocked his long pointed ears toward the monster, though the words that rolled and boomed in his skull had no sonic origin. "Yes — yes, you look very like a native. Except for those eyes and ears — but dark glasses and a hat will cover it very well. That high-cheeked cast of face, and very white skin, would also be considered unusual, but not so much so as to arouse great comment."

"Let me get my facts straight," thought Beoric. "Just what planet is this? I mean, what is it called?"

"The natives call it Earth, of course. Don't all land dwelling races call their world Earth? The pronunciation in the local language — they still speak many separate tongues — is —" The monster thought the sound. "The sun is called Sol by them, and we use that term since it is easy to pronounce and all our names differ. This is Sol III, as you probably know."

"I knew it was the third planet, yes. But who are 'we'? Is there more than one race of — visitors?"

"Indeed. Indeed." With sudden suspicion: "But I am answering all the questions. Who are you? Where are you from? Where are your companions? What is your purpose? Why is there no iron in your spaceship? What sort of civilization has your race evolved?"

"One thing at a time." Beoric's answer was taut and wary. "I will not give information away, but I will trade it for what you know. You cannot expect me, on finding a whole new interstellar civilization, to reveal all the secrets of my own until I am convinced of your good intentions."

"Fair enough. But who are you, then?"

"My name, in the spoken language of my race, is Beoric, though that hardly matters. My home star lies clear across the Galaxy, near the periphery; I will not at present be more specific than that. My race, the Alfar, evolved a faster-than-light drive quite a long time ago, several centuries past in fact, and visited the nearer stars. Finally the expedition to which I belong was sent out on a survey which was to swing clear around the Galaxy, investigating stars picked at random so as to get a rough idea of overall conditions. But since we necessarily had to select only a small fraction of suns for study, it is not surprising that we passed right through your civilization without realizing it."

"Where is your ship? That little boat in which you landed could only hold one or two."

"You cannot expect me to reveal the ship's orbit. I came down alone in the boat. The presence of cities here indicated intelligent life with some degree of technology, so I landed — secretly, of course — to investigate more thoroughly. Apparently you detected us some distance out."

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"We spotted your boat, yes, by its gravitic vibrations. But not your ship. What sort of screen do you have for star drive vibrations? We've never been able to conceal them that well. And why is your boat chemically powered?"

"The vibration screen must remain my secret. As for the oil-burning spaceboat — well, we have evolved an unusual oil technology on Alfar. With the extreme efficiency of the gravity beam, we just don't need atomic energy for such a small craft."

"I see. But I could detect no iron or silver in your boat — "

"Both metals are hard to obtain on Alfar. We manage quite well with alloys and with copper." Beoric leaned forward, as if suddenly realizing he was giving away too much. "But it is your turn now. Who are you? Why are you here? Why this inquisition, rather than a free welcome?"

"It is a long story," thought the monster. "Nor have you been a model of openness. However — welcome to Earth. Perhaps you would like to come to our headquarters — ?"

"Well — it would certainly be the most convenient starting point — I warn you, if I do not return to my ship within three rotations of this planet, they will be coming down after me — with weapons."

"You need have no fear. We are not greedy. Earth has plenty for all."

Beoric stood watching the bony, snouted face of the monster. It seemed to him that he could almost follow the being's private thoughts:

Wherever this creature is from, whether or not he is telling the truth, he must be alone on this planet. We would have detected any other space vessel landing anywhere. Also, he is cut off from his companions. The inverse square law makes it impossible to send a thought more than a few hundred miles at most, and his ship must be further out or we would detect it. He is alone, unarmed, and incommunicado. In three days we can decide what to do —

"My vocal name is Hraagung. Come, we have a car waiting."

"A car — ?"

"Yes, of course." Hraagung chuckled, with a certain horrible sardonicism. "I was chosen to meet you, since my own senses could follow the metal of your boat without elaborate instruments. But for obvious reasons, I cannot move about openly on this planet."

"I have to get inside before dawn," thought Beoric. "Alfar's sun is dim and red, nearly extinct. For that reason, I can see very easily in this moonlight, but cannot endure the glare and the ultraviolet light of a G-type star."

"So?" Hraagung paused, and Beoric could almost see him turning this revelation over in his cold brain. It was an admission of weakness, to be sure, but it had to be made. And, to a highly advanced civilization with its screens and protective suits, the handicap was not serious. "What would you have done if you hadn't met us?"

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"Hidden away by day and slept, of course. The fact that the cities were lighted showed that the natives would be diurnal, which would make my work of spying all the easier."

"Yes — to be sure. Well, we haven't far to go. This way." The monster lumbered in advance. Beoric wrung the water from his shoulder-length silvery-blond hair and followed.

They came through the line of trees onto a paved highway. A native automobile was parked there — four-wheeled, enclosed, obviously chemical-powered. As he neared it, Beoric felt the sudden nerve-chill that meant — *iron.*

He had expected it, but that made it none the easier. Every ingrained instinct screamed at him to come no closer. Iron, iron, iron — touch it and see your hand go up in smoke! Iron, cold iron, crouched there under the moon!

And he must enter that metal box, and not for an instant must he show the fear that ripped along his shrinking nerves and dinned in his brain. If they knew, if they found the fatal weakness of the Alfar, he was done. A thousand years of slow work and scheming and waiting were done — Earth was done. And it all depended on him.

For a moment he couldn't do it. In spite of his resolve, in spite of his many rehearsals, in spite of the bleak fact that he *must* go through with it — he couldn't. He couldn't deny the reflexes that knotted his muscles and locked his will and brought sweat cold and bitter out on his body.

Courage. The thought quivered deep in his brain. It came from the sea, from the fields beyond the road, from the trees that stood whispering in the night wind. *Courage, Beoric. You are not alone.*

They were sending him more than unspoken words. There was an actual flow of nervous energy into his body, an almost physical force suddenly entering him, bracing him, stilling the wild thunder of his heart and the panic-storm in his brain. Calmness came, and he walked boldly forward.

A man stood beside the car. No — not a man, not an Earthling, though he looked like one and wore the conventional shirt, trousers, coat, and whatnot else of the planet. He was tall, as tall as Beoric, and the Alf could feel the strength that was in him, coiled in his lean body and his long skull like a great cold snake. The sheer aura of that tremendous intellect and neural force could not be hidden, it forced itself out into the telepathic bands and shouted arrogantly along the nerves of Beoric and Hraagung.

The stranger had been listening to the conversation on the beach. His thought came slow and — deep — "Welcome, Beoric of Alfar. I trust your stay will be pleasant and mutually profitable. I am — my race has abandoned vocal language altogether. But on this planet I use the spoken name of Adam Kane." He caught a question in Beoric's thoughts, the Alf had detected overtones. "Yes, my race is so nearly like the Earthling — outwardly! — that only

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a little surgery enabled us to pass unquestioned. Someone must act as intermediary between aliens and natives, and so the choice falls on us. Which is very useful — in fact, it is necessary to the enterprises we maintain here."

Hraagung crawled into the rear of the car and crouched low so he could not be seen from the outside. His immense body filled the back seat, and the rank reptile smell of him filled the whole vehicle. Kane slid behind the wheel. "Come along," he thought impatiently.

Fear was cold in Beoric as he touched the right-hand door handle. It was chrome-plated, safe enough for him, but the near presence of iron shuddered in his nerves. With a convulsive movement, he opened the door and slipped in beside Kane. The car purred into motion.

"Where are you from?" thought Beoric. "You still haven't told me."

"From various stars hereabouts," answered Kane. "I come from the most distant." Beoric recognized Deneb in this thought. "But" — arrogantly — "we Vaettir arrived here first. Somewhat later, other races mastered the secret of faster-than-light travel and came to Sol in the course of their explorations. Hraagung is from — "Beoric translated the thought-image, in his own private mind, as Sirius. "And so forth. Today a number of planets have vested interests in Earth. Under the leadership of the Vaettir, they have set up a system such that their various enterprises do not conflict."

He looked at Beoric. The eyes fairly blazed in his lean face, an intolerable glare which the Alf fought to meet, and his hard thought vibrated like vicious lightning in the other's brain: "We are not hostile to newcomers who will respect the system. If they wish to open some project here or on some other of our subject planets which does not clash with established interests, they are free to do so under the rules and direction of the Vaettir. But if they violate the code, they will be destroyed."

Beoric sat quiescent, trying to think how he should react. After a while, he thought slowly: "That seems fair enough. As a matter of fact, a similar system is not unknown in my civilization. It is possible that our two cultures could have mutually profitable intercourse."

"Perhaps!" The answering vibrations lashed back, hard and suspicious.

"Precisely what forms of exploitation are carried on here?" asked the Alf.

"Various ones, depending on the race," said Hraagung. "The Procyonites find Earthlings an excellent source of blood. The Altairians simply want to observe historical processes, as part of their project of mass-action study. The Arcturian economy depends on controlling the productive facilities of a great number of subject planets, skimming the cream off their industry and agriculture. We of Sirius find Earth a convenient military outpost and refueling station — also —" The thought was like a tiger licking its lips — "the natives serve other purposes."

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Beoric flashed a question at Kane: "What of your race, the — Denebian Vaettir?"

The answer was steel-hard, with a bleak amusement shimmering over the surface: "We have many interests in this part of the Galaxy."

The Alf leaned back and tried to relax. The almost empty land was beginning to show houses here and there, and the horizon ahead was lit with a dull glow. The car sped smoothly, swiftly over the highway, at a pace that an Earthling could hardly have controlled. It was dark inside the body, a thickness of shadows rank with the Sirian reptile stink. The reflected headlights threw a dim luminance on the harsh bony features of Adam Kane, limning them against the darkness in a nightmare tracing of cheekbones and jaw and cruel jutting nose. The nervous force of the Denebian could not be hidden, it swirled and eddied in the car like an atmosphere. Beoric had to fight its overwhelming power.

"Our headquarters are in the city ahead — New York, it's called," thought Hraagung. "We are on Long Island now."

"Your spaceships don't land there, though?" asked Beoric. He did not try to cover his interest, it would only be natural in a traveler from a distant star — nor could he hope to hide any emotional overtones of his thoughts from the blazing intellect of the Denebian.

"Not in the city, no, though we do have one there for emergency use — in fact, our building is little more than a disguised ship. The actual bases and landing fields are elsewhere — "

No matter how he fought to suppress his emotions, Beoric could not keep a shout out of his thoughts. Ye gods — the building was a ship — *the building was a ship!* Why — that meant —

He grew aware of the cold Sirian eyes focusing on him. The Denebian's terrible gaze did not turn from the unwinding road, but Beoric felt his senses — and the gods knew how many uncanny perceptions he had — licking at the Alf's hard-held mental bloc, tongues of fire that —

He laughed, a little shakily, and explained: "I was startled. I had never heard of putting up such a construction without the natives knowing about it. How did you manage it?"

The Denebian's slow deep thought rolled through his brain: "It was simple. We put up the apartment building as a shell. It was only necessary to control the minds of a few city inspectors, since casual observers would not realize the difference. Then, one stormy night, we brought the ship down into the shell. Our laborers completed the disguise with a roof, interior walls and floors."

"You used native labor?"

"Of course. Even at the time, none of them realized the fact that they were not putting up an ordinary structure."

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"I see." Beoric saw indeed, and in spite of knowing most of it beforehand he was utterly shaken. What sort of brains did the Vaettir have, that they could casually supply hundreds of men with false memories, prevent them even during their work from taking conscious notice of incongruities — ? What was the extent of their power?

Tonight, he thought grimly, *I'll find out!*

Tonight — indeed! The answering thought, on the Alf band, came from behind the racing car. They must be following, in their own vehicles, and —

"You must realize," thought Kane, almost conversationally, "that the exploitation of Earth is quite old. In fact, the first Vaettir arrived here —" he thought of a length of time which Beoric rendered as about four thousand years ago. "We began to colonize extensively about seven centuries ago, at which time the native civilization was less complex and it was very easy to pass oneself off as whatever one desired. Thus our organization is firmly established. Through the corporations we control on Earth, the governments which we influence — or run outright whenever it is necessary, through the old and highly reputable family connections of some of the Vaettir, through a number of other means which you can easily imagine, we can do exactly as we please, under the very noses of the natives." For a moment his iron features split in a grin. "The only ones who suspect that Earthlings are not their own property are labelled cranks — and generally the label is quite correct."

Beoric thought of the ruthlessness he had read in Hraagung's mind and asked, "Why do you take so much trouble? Why not annex Earth outright?"

"That would not suit the purposes of the Vaettir." The cold answer was like a suddenly drawn sword. "It is part of our plan that the directed evolution of Earthly civilization be thought a native project — for some time to come."

Beoric nodded. He slumped back in his seat, watching the blurred buildings reel crazily past. It was plain enough who really ran this corner of the Galaxy. The Sirians, for one, would probably like nothing better than to come as conquerors, treating Earthlings frankly as cattle. But if Deneb said "no", then "no" it was.

And — we are pitting ourselves against — that! We, who could not prevail against —

"You cannot hope to conceal your presence entirely?" he thought.

"We don't try," shrugged Hraagung. "In earlier times, we went about almost openly, and were often seen by natives, thereby giving rise to much legendry — "

Yes, thought Beoric, within the locked chambers of his own skull. *Yes, I know the myths. Frightened glimpses of unhuman beings stalking over the world, of a science from beyond the stars, became trolls, goblins, ifrits, dragons, all the horrors of the old stories were grounded in more horrible fact. What brought on the wave of*

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medieval devil-worship if not the growing influx from outer space? Who was the Satan they worshipped at the Black Mass if not a Denebian or a Sirian or some other monster who found a cult of fanatics useful — and who must often have laughed as he conferred with his brethren highly placed in church and state?

They are most of Earth's mythology. But planets have at least a few myths of their own —

"Later," went on the Sirian, "when too obvious evidence of our presence might have led more sophisticated minds to suspect the truth, we resorted to a measure of — precaution. Who knows what goes on in some lonely part of a great cattle ranch — or in his neighbor's house in a great city? To whom does it occur that the silent partners controlling key industries may not be on Earth at all — ?

"There are glimpses. Why bother to conceal them? A man who spied me on a dark night would hardly put his own reputation in jeopardy by telling of it — or, if he did, it would be the ravings of delirium, not so? On occasions where someone knows too much, his memories are removable. Almost daily, sign of us is seen — objects in the sky, poltergeist phenomena, vanishings and appearances, all the rest. But who will be able to make anything of such scattered and fragmentary evidence?" Hraagung's deep vocal chuckle vibrated in the body of the car. "Those few who have collected any sort of coherent proof and tried to deduce the truth, are laughed at as paranoiacs."

Kane's wolf-grin flashed out. "The beauty of it is," thought the Denebian, "that almost all such people really are paranoid. It is an obvious sign of instability to attribute the world's trouble to outside persecutors — even if such an attribution should happen to be correct!"

The hurtling car was moving more slowly now as it entered frequented streets. Buildings loomed on either side, blotting out the stars, and there was iron, iron everywhere, the city was a cage of steel. For an instant of blind horror, Beoric fought not to scream. Then slowly, shakily, his resolution returned. After all, the metal wouldn't harm him unless he touched it. And too many centuries depended on him now. And it was too late to back out.

That's right, Beoric. The strong reassuring thoughts beat in the back of his head. *We're after you. We're entering the city too —*

For a moment, he savored the realization. He was, at least, a part of his people, they were with him.

It came to him, not for the first time, that if the Alfar brain structure permitted them to telepath on a wave band undetectable to any other race, then doubtless the Sirians and the others — above all, the Vaettir — could also think on levels unreadable to him. And — what thoughts were flashing back and forth in the night around him?

If — oh, gods, if the incredible Vaettir really could listen in on his thoughts,

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if that was the secret of their power, if Kane was simply leading the Alfar into a trap — But the chance had to be taken. Earth itself was a trap.

He sat in silence. The car wound smoothly through darkened streets where only the dull-yellow lamps and an occasional furtive movement in the shadows and alleys had life. It was near the ebb time of the great city's life; it slept like a sated beast under the sinking moon.

The fields and woods, hills and waters and sky, never slept. There was always life, a rustle of wings, a pattering of feet, a gleam of eyes out of the night, there was always the flowing tide of nervous energy, wakeful, alert. Life like a sea beyond the city, and Beoric had never been really alone.

Until now. But the city slept, and there was nothing wild to run in the fields and leap in the moonlit waters. Beoric's straining mind sensed a few rodents scuttering in the ground, a slinking cat or two, the threadlike nervous impulses of insects fluttering around the one-eyed street lamps. Now and again there would be a human thought, someone wakeful — and the thought seemed to echo in the vast hollow silence of the city, it was alone, alone.

The city slept. Beoric could sense the life force of the sleeping humans, nervous, jagged-feeling, even now. It was like an overwhelming lethargy, a million and a million and a million sleeping bodies with all their pain and sorrow and longing turned loose to wander in their minds. The Alf locked his brain to the sticky tide, but it rolled around him, it lay like a sweat-dampened cloak over his nervous system.

They are too many. The sheer magnitude of life-force of — how many millions? Ten? — is more than we can endure. And yet we dare challenge the rulers of this world.

They were in the outer edges of the decadent zone surrounding the main business district. It was the logical location for the headquarters — not so evilly situated as to be suspect to police, but in a relatively idle area which would be empty of traffic at night. And now — yes, the quiver of life-force up ahead, impulses of a wave-form not quite Earthly, it came from *that* building.

Beoric looked at the darkened bulk before which the automobile came to a halt. It was a ten-story apartment building, as drab and dingy as any of its neighbors. A dim light glowed in the door, picking out a sign: NO VACANCY. *Of course not!* thought Beoric, and suppressed an impulse to hysterical laughter.

"No one watching," flashed Kane's thought. "We can go right in."

Hraagung's unwieldy bulk crossed the sidewalk with surprising speed. The three entered into a hall like that of any other building of this type. Beoric's sensitive nostrils wrinkled at the odors of dirt and stale cookery, but he had to admit the disguise was complete.

Even to an elderly human who sat half dozing at the desk. Beoric dipped into his mind for an instant and withdrew with a shudder from the — hollowness.

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But the haughty Vaettir would not trouble to pose as menials. They would need a few authentic natives, to act as janitors and whatever other fronts were necessary. Natives who could pass for normal individuals, but whom their vampire masters had sucked dry of all personality. Flesh-and-blood robots —

Kane led the way into an elevator. "This runs directly into the spaceship," he explained. "You will find more suitable accommodations there."

Such as a coffin, maybe? Or more probably a dissecting table. They'll want to know what I really am.

They emerged into a short corridor lit by coldly gleaming fluorotubes. Kane gestured at a door, which opened to reveal a small, richly furnished room.

"This is one of the guest quarters we keep for transient visitors to Earth," thought the Denebian. "I hope you will find it suitable. The furniture adjusts itself to the shape of the user's body, and you can set temperature, humidity, air pressure, and the rest to whatever is most comfortable for you."

The thought of being set in an airtight chamber was not at all to Beoric's liking. "I am not tired, now, thanks," he vibrated. "I would be more interested in seeing the other colonists."

"This is only headquarters, as I told you," answered Kane. "But most members of the grand control council for Sol are already here, and I have summoned the rest mentally. They should arrive soon."

"All the councillors? That is an honor."

Kane skinned his teeth in a humorless smile. "Not too much of an honor for a visitor from so far away," his thought almost purred. And then, a naked rapier flash: "After all, we have to decide what to do about you!"

Beoric knew, suddenly and bleakly, that he was not intended to leave the ship still in possession of his own personality. It should not take more than two or three of the Vaettir brains to smash through his mental defenses and get complete control of him. And when they knew all he knew about the Alfar, he he would go as their depersonalized agent to his ship.

The Alf's fingers touched the sheathed knife strapped under his tunic. He should be able to hold off such an assault long enough to whip out the weapon, and its iron blade would burn through his heart. The Vaettir no doubt had techniques for reviving the dead, but they wouldn't work on him — in minutes his brain and its knowledge would be crumbled, in hours his rapidly proteolyzed flesh would be dust, even his bones would not last many years. The metabolism which was at once their strength and weakness had at least been the cloak of the Alfar.

He was no longer afraid of death. He more than half expected it. But he could not control the inward shudder that racked him at the thought that the Vaettir might somehow be able to upset the plan. There was so little that the Alfar knew about them — so horribly little.

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Kane started down the hall. Beoric followed, uneasily aware of Hraagung coming ponderously after. He was between the two monsters, no chance of escape. It lay with the others now, and he didn't dare call on them.

They entered a cubicle which shot into sudden motion. Beoric judged that it was carrying them toward the center of the ship. He flashed out an impulse on the Alf band, to guide the others, but there was no answer.

The ship was silent. He could hear nothing but the purr of the moving cube, the breathing of Hraagung crouched hard and cold beside him. He could feel the surge of inhuman nerve flows, swirling through his own telepathic receptive center like a dark tide, and he could feel the iron frame of the ship, its faint residual magnetism seemed to chill his nerves. Thank all the gods, the metal floor and wall and ceilings were nonferrous. But he was in a cage of iron, a spider web, and the breath choked in his throat.

The cube stopped, its door opening on a little antechamber. As the three passengers stepped out, another creature flashed into sight on a metal plate and stalked toward the room beyond.

Beoric started. "What the devil — !" Then, catching himself with the native quick-mindness of his race: "I take it you've somehow managed to apply the interstellar drive principle to short distances. But how? Our civilization was never able to use it for other than hops of a light-year or more."

"The true minimum distance is about a hundred miles," answered Kane. "Thus we can summon the whole Solar control council in almost no time. Even the officers from the other planets should be present tonight."

"The planets! But — but gods, that's millions of miles off! How can your thought reach — ?"

Kane's intolerably brilliant eyes rested speculatively on the Alf. "The Vaettir have mastered certain principles of telepathy unattainable by lesser races," he thought haughtily.

And — how much else have they mastered? It's no wonder they rule their civilization.

They entered the council chamber. It was long and high, and the icy white light shimmering on the metal walls made them seem peculiarly unreal, as if the room were of infinite extent. There was a table near the center, around which, on adjustable couches, sat and lay and squatted the rulers of Earth.

Beoric's eyes swept over them, and the shrinking, ingrained fear of all his people's fugitive generations screamed along his nerves and shouted in his brain. He stood still, fighting for calm, and met their gaze with his own blind blue stare. He knew their races already, though he let Hraagung point out which each of them belonged to.

There were two each from Sirius, Procyon, Arcturus, and Altair, and five Denebians. Here, if nowhere else, the utter dominance of the Vaettir was

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open and arrogant. They sat at the head of the table, wrapped in their own pride, and Beoric could not meet the flame of their eyes.

He looked over the others. Besides the Denebians, only the Sirians seemed really formidable. The Procyonites were wizened little insectile horrors that sucked blood from Earthlings asleep and fed on radiated nervous energy of the wakeful, a completely parasitic species which, though it lowered the energy and intelligence of its victims, did less harm than the vampire legends tracing to its activities suggested. The Arcturians were cunning, ruthless — their muzzled faces even looked vulpine — and highly intelligent, but physically comparatively small and weak. The placid Altairians, coiled in their tentacles and watching the scene with calm cool eyes, were here only as scientific observers. They had no sympathy for the natives, and cooperated willingly enough in the control of Earth, but they did no direct harm.

He had to reckon with all of them, thought Beoric tautly. But it was the raw imperialism of Sirius and the absolute mastery of Deneb which were the real shadows over Earth.

Over — the Galaxy? Who knew? Just how far did the shadow empire reach?

He grew aware that Kane and Hraagung had taken their places. The council table was full now. And there was no place for him, he had to stand in front of them. They were hardly bothering not to slap him in the face with the knowledge that he was a prisoner.

"By now all of you know the stranger's story," flashed Kane's thought. "The question before us is what action to take."

The slow, almost drowsy, and keenly penetrating thought of an Altairian came: "I would suggest that first we settle whether or not the story is true."

"Of course," answered Kane. Sardonically: "But it would be most discourteous to our guest not to accept it for the time being, at least."

"To be sure." The Altairian's gray gaze swung to Beoric. "Suppose we simply trade a few questions and answers, to clear up mutual ignorance."

"Gladly," bowed the Alf. Suddenly, he felt almost at home. This was like the court intrigue of the old days, the swift fencing with words, the subtle mockery — if he couldn't at least hold his own, he didn't deserve to.

"I can understand a certain natural suspicion on your part," he began. "But it does seem a little extreme for a great civilization to be so concerned about one ship."

"A ship from a culture of we know not what strength, a ship with at least one magnificent weapon, the vibration screen, of which we know nothing," flashed Hraagung bluntly. "What word will you carry back to your home sun?"

"Friendly word, I assure you. What use would it be to conquer on the other side of the Galaxy? What use would Earth be to us, who need armor to venture out on its daylight?"

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"There are plenty of nocturnal races who never see their own sun if they can avoid it," grunted Hraagung. "You would find Earth's night perfectly comfortable. However, I assume that you would be after higher stakes than one insignificant planet."

"The trouble with you Sirians," thought an Arcturian sarcastically, "is that you cannot imagine any mentality different from your own. You, who simply conquer planets to loot them, still cannot comprehend the attitude of, say, my race, which deliberately builds up Earth in order to gain thereby. You — why, you are on Earth, you have a military base here, simply because you fear that otherwise we'll put one up to use against Sirius."

"Oh, I suppose they like an occasional snack, too," jeered a Procyonite. "They like to arrange a disappearance of a native — into their own bellies. They're good butchers — but they never heard of milking."

The Sirians stirred dangerously, and Beoric felt the tide of anger that rose in the room. They hated each other, these rival races. If it weren't for the steel grip of the Vaettir, they'd be at each other's throats in a minute.

A Denebian thought cut through the emotional fog. "That will do." It was a chill peremptory command, and Beoric could feel the sudden throttling of rage within the others. "We have more important business than simply squabbling. This arrival constitutes a major crisis."

"I tell you," thought Beoric, "we are only peaceful explorers. If you wish to be isolated, the Alfar will be to glad to give your territory a wide berth."

"That is not the point," vibrated Kane. "The very existence of another, comparable civilization is a danger to our plans. To be perfectly frank, the Vaettir intend to expand their activities. Even if the Alfar remained neutral, their suns would constitute foci of resistance for such races as already have the vibratory engine but have not yet had contact with other equal cultures. The history of the Galaxy has been planned carefully in advance, with many developments set to take place of themselves without the supervision of the comparatively small number of Vaettir. We thought we knew all races which had interstellar spaceships. Now the Alfar appear, a totally unforeseen factor. Even with the friendliest intentions, you will upset our calculations.

"Thus — " the terrible eyes blazed at the Alf — "you see why this emergency council is necessary. So great, indeed, is the emergency that all the Vaettir in the Solar System are here tonight to settle your case."

All of them! For a moment, utter exultation flamed in Beoric. *All of them? Every last damned one! That was as much as we dared hope for.*

And then, in a sudden sickening backwash of dismay: *But — if they really only need five to run the Solar System — how colossal are not their powers? What may these five not be able to do tonight?*

He grew aware of the eyes on him, of the thoughts and senses probing at him,

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studying and analyzing and drawing unguessable conclusions. He laughed, shakily, and thought: "This is quite a surprise. And, naturally, somewhat alarming to me."

"You need not fear conquest," thought Kane almost contemptuously. "The Vaettir permit only certain planets to be taken over outright. The rest, according to our plans, are controlled in more subtle ways. Such as Earth, for instance."

Beoric licked his lips. They seemed suddenly dry. "How — many — stars — to date?"

There was a moment of hesitation, then: "No reason why you should not know," answered an Altairian. "The civilization — which is to say, the Denebian dominance — covers about five hundred stars so far, and is becoming increasingly influential on a thousand or more other systems. Eventually, of course — " He shrugged, a sinuous movement of boneless arms.

"You can't — expect me — to like the idea."

"Not at first," The Arcturian's thought was ingratiating. "But actually such civilization can be very beneficial to the subjects."

"How — "

"Why, take our own activities here on Earth, for instance. The meager natural resources of the Arcturian System have long been almost exhausted, yet our race lives well by building up industry on backward planets like Earth and taking a certain part of the produce. About two hundred years ago we started an industrial revolution here and made its progress as rapid as the Denebians permitted. *We* controlled the booming industry, through the various fronts of the organization, and as much of what was produced as we needed went to Arcturus. We led native researchers to take the lines leading to success — and they thought they were responsible for it. Workers in, say, aircraft factories still don't know that a number of the parts they make go into Arcturian aircars and ships; all who are in a position to know are misled by carefully arranged records, or simply come under sufficient mental control to be incapable of noticing the discrepancies. Oil, iron, alloys, grain, machine parts — some of it all goes to Arcturus. Not much from any one planet — but there are many planets."

"But — governments — "

"Governments!" The foxy face grinned. "*We* are the governments, or as much of them as necessary. Why, a number of backward nations have been forcibly industrialized by revolutionary governments which we arranged in the first place. If you knew how many dictators and commissioners and industrialists and whatnot else are depersonalized natives with a direct mental link to some extraterrestrial, you would appreciate how completely Earth is in thrall. And — when we are done with them, when some new development is

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commanded — they go. They are defeated in war, or die, or — fade out of the picture one way or another.

"And yet —" The thought was swift, persuasive — "yet think how Earth has benefited from it. The population has been approximately doubling every century. The standard of living has gone steadily up. The latent resources of the planet are being put to work. Earthlings are pawns, yes — but very well treated pawns."

I wonder. What about the endless, senseless wars that rack them, what about the pollution of the fair green fields with smoke and waste, what about poverty and misery and the loss of all control over their own destiny? What about the time when the purposes of the Vaettir call for the lash? Call for the — discarding — of the human race? But I'm not supposed to know that.

"There is no need to employ euphemisms," came the icy thought of Kane. "Earthlings receive whatever sort of treatment the particular situation calls for. If an individual native comes to prominence and carries out policies contrary to our desires, he dies. There were presidents of this country, for instance, who would have changed the planned course of events. They died — the bullet of a controlled assassin, the hemorrhage of a focused supersonic beam, whatever means was most convenient. The Vaettir will not tolerate interference with their purposes."

"Yes — and what are those aims?" Beoric swung to the five grim-faced monsters at the head of the table. His thoughts were tinged with a fear that was not all feigned. "I take it that as the oldest and most powerful mentally of the local races you have established control over them, so that even your supposed equals jump to your bidding. But — why? What do you want? Where is this great plan of yours leading?"

"That is not for you or anyone else to question," came the bleak reply. "You would not understand the truth anyway. If you said that the Vaettir aimed to rule the attainable universe, it would be an imputation of your own childish motivations to us, for that aim is only a means to an end. If you said that the Vaettir intelligence can draw on the directed minds of whole planets, increasing its own potential correspondingly, and that for this reason it is necessary to direct the history of those planets toward the most useful, easily regimented type of thinking, you would be closer to the truth. Perhaps — " for a bare instant, the lightning-like thought sagged under a burden of vast and intolerable weariness, the despair of the ultimately evolved being who has nothing left to achieve — "perhaps, if you said that there is really nothing else to do, except die, you would almost realize the truth. Almost."

Where are they? Where are the others? Gods, why don't they come?

Beoric thought slowly and bitterly: "So that is why there must be war and misery and evolution of slave states. That is why men — why natives of all the

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planets you rule must be fettered by old mistakes which even they can see are wrong. You say there are still separate nations on this world. But a race capable of understanding the technology I have glimpsed must surely be intelligent enough to realize that only a unified planetary government can end the horrors of their destinies. Yet — they don't have it. Because it wouldn't suit the purposes of the Vaettir."

"They will have it, eventually," answered Kane. "But it will be the sort of state *we* want. And stop wasting sympathy on the natives. Do you feel sorry for your own domestic animals?"

Suddenly his thought rang out, chill and deadly, overwhelming in its sheer volume of savage energy: "This farce has gone far enough. I think you have trapped yourself sufficiently, and we can begin finding out who you really are."

"Eh — *huh?*" The surprise flashed around the council table. Only the five great Vaettir were in possession of themselves — *they* had known what was coming.

"Of course." Kane's thought roared and boomed in their skulls. The Alf sagged under that rush of devastating cold fury. "Surely you were not taken in by his story — Yes, you were. And it was not without a certain ingenuity.

"But how could an obviously inferior race find a way of screening off star-drive vibrations when the Vaettir had vainly sought such a means for millennia? Why was the stranger, who claimed to come from a civilization not unused to this sort of arrangement, so interested in the details of how Earth is run — and so shocked by them? Yet — shocked in the wrong way, at the wrong times. From the moment I met him, I was studying his emotional reactions. They fitted no reasonable pattern if his story were true. He was too interested in some details, too indifferent to others. Only a Denebian might have noticed the anomalies, for he covered up very well, but they were there.

"There is only one answer." The terrible vibrations filled the room in a sudden soundless thunder. "*There is no interstellar spaceship. There is no planet Alfar. He came from within the Solar System!*"

For an instant there was a silence in which Beoric's sudden horror spurted numbingly along his spine. Lost, lost, the Vaettir had known after all —

No. They still don't know. The thought was like a strong arm suddenly laid about his sagging body. *But we expected that they might deduce this much. And we're just outside the building now.*

For an instant Beoric saw through the eyes of the communicating Alf. A dozen automobiles were parking all around the block. That they were constructed entirely of nonferrous alloys was not evident to the vision, and the beings who tumbled out of them wore conventional native clothes, could pass for human in the vague light. But — they had weapons.

Hold them off, Beoric. Hold their attention for the few minutes it will take us to

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get to the council chamber and cut off their escape — or their access to their defenses. Keep them from noticing our radiations as we approach.

The hurried message ended. And now the minds of the council were crashing against Beoric's brain, drowning his own thoughts in a roar of invading energy. His consciousness reeled toward an abysmal darkness — no, he had to keep them occupied, had to.

"Wait!" he gasped vocally. "Wait — I'll tell you — "

Kane's mind was like a steel band around his. "Start telling, then. But you won't save your miserable personality if you let slip even one falsehood."

"We — we're from — Earth itself —" *Gods, am I telling? There's no help for it — But if even one councillor manages to get word of this to Deneb —*

"You aren't Earthlings!"

"No, we — yes, we are. But not — human Earthlings."

"How could you evolve on a planet to which you are so ill adapted?"

"We aren't. We are extremely well adapted to Earth's night. We haven't yet deduced just how our type of life got started. Obviously it has a common origin with the ordinary sort, but it must lie far back, perhaps in the Archeozoic. Somehow forms of life evolved which could not stand actinic light but which could thrive in darkness, seeing by infra-red waves — In spite of their great differences, which are metabolic rather than chemical, the two types of flesh are mutually digestible, so the nocturnal sort did not lack for food — There was quite a variety of such life forms once, and eventually they even evolved a manlike species — us!"

"Nonsense!" Beoric gasped with the pain of the Vaettir assault on his brain. "There are no geological or paleontological indications that such forms ever existed."

"Of course not." The Alf's thoughts flowed frantically. Would they never come? Where were they? What was keeping them? "I said that the nocturnal life's metabolism is peculiar. The natural balance, involving high rates of both anabolism and catabolism, makes very long life spans possible. I am five hundred years old, and still young. But it means that the body decays very quickly on death. Even the bones are soon oxidized, being organic. No fossil traces would remain at all. Perhaps a few have been preserved by freak accidents, though I doubt it, but they would be very few and human paleontologists simply haven't chanced to find them. And, of course, there was never any possibility of interbreeding with the dominant forms."

"Dominant? But why should the nocturnals have become —"

"Extinct? Yes, they nearly are. They couldn't really compete with the other type, which could endure both day and night, and which reproduced much faster. The Alfar have few children in their long lives. Our numbers have been on the wane for centuries, and almost all other animals of our sort are extinct."

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"That still doesn't account —"

"We have other weaknesses, too." *There's no harm in telling now. If the others don't come soon, it's all over anyhow.* "Certain metals, silver and iron, are fatal to us. They catalyze rapid proteolysis and oxidation of our tissues." Beoric saw Kane's eyes widen the tiniest fraction, and knew what icy calculations must be going on in that long skull. He went on, drearily: "Even in neolithic times, humans had the edge on us, and once they had learned metallurgy our doom was sealed. They drove us out of all lands they inhabited and, for religious and superstitious reasons, destroyed most of our cities and other works. The invention of firearms, which we could not duplicate, was simply the last blow. We gave up the fight and retreated into wastelands and into the night, living in hidden dwellings and having little contact with humans. Once in a while, there might be a brief encounter, but the last of these was three hundred years ago, and since then we have lived so remotely that men no longer believe we ever existed."

"And yet —" Kane paused. "It is not illogical. If a human, say, were to be told that there are several nonhuman races sharing the planet with him, he would hardly balk at one more. Even if such an extra race were — native!" For a moment he sat quiescent, then: "What is that?"

His thought lashed like a fist at Beoric, and the other Vaettir hurled their rage with him. The Alf fell to the floor, screaming with the pain of it.

"Strangers — I feel their vibrations — *Strangers in the ship!*" Kane made one tigerish bound toward the door, toward escape — or the atomic guns of the vessel.

An arrow whined, and through blurring eyes Beoric saw the Denebian pitch forward with the feathered shaft through his breast. He saw his fellows, the warriors of the Alfar, coming through the door, and they had cast off their human coats and hats, they wore the golden-shining beryllium-copper helmets and byrnies of the old days, and they carried the old weapons. Longbow, spear, sword, ax, and a shrieking fury that clamored between the metal walls, the blood-howl for vengeance.

The air was thick with the sighing arrows. All were aimed at the Denebians, who fell before their terrible mental force, that might yet have annihilated the invaders, could utter more than a snarl. And now the warriors were on the councillors, ax and sword rising and falling and rising bloodily again.

"Save one!" cried the king. "Save an Altairian!"

Beoric sat dizzily up. Strength was flowing back into him, strength and a gasping incredulous realization that he was still alive. That — they had won. The Vaettir were dead.

"How are you, Beoric?" The anxious voice was close to his ear.

"I'm all right." The Alf climbed unsteadily to his feet. "How — is it?"

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"All well. I can't detect anybody else on the ship. It's ours," said the king.

He turned to the surviving Altairian, who lay coiled in his tentacles under the spears of the warriors and watched them with calm eyes. "Your people were always the most decent," thought the king, "and I think you will be the most cooperative. We want you to show us how to run this ship. If you do, we'll release you on some planet from which you can find your way home."

"Agreed," answered the octopoid. "Would you mind explaining exactly who you are and what is your purpose and how you accomplished all this?"

"We are the nocturnal equivalent of Earth humankind," answered Beoric. "We were almost powerless, but being telepathic we did know of the interstellar exploitation which was going on. It menaced us just as much as it did our old human enemies — but it also offered us an opportunity.

"In time, we learned how to make nonferrous alloys which would substitute for iron and steel. And by telepathic 'spying' on the invaders, over a period of centuries, we picked up enough hints to be able to generate gravity beams and, eventually, to build a small spaceboat.

"We knew we could never enter the Denebian stronghold if they realized our true nature. The remnants of our race would simply be hunted down. But if we could send an agent — myself — to pose as a visitor from some great, formidable civilization beyond their own, they would treat him with respect — for a while, anyway. He could get into one of their ships. And his fellows, whom the aliens would not expect to be on Earth with him, could use the diversion he created to come in after him and take possession of the ship."

"And so you have it," murmured the Altairian's thought. "And you have wiped out all the Vaettir in the Solar System, completely disorganizing their rule here till they can send someone else. Well done! But — what now?"

"First," said the king, "the whole race of the Alfar is leaving the Solar System. This ship should be big enough to carry them all. There are so few of us left — But when we find a planet which suits us, an uninhabited world we can hold without fear, hidden from the Vaettir by the vastness of the Galaxy, we can begin to make our comeback. After that — a warned, roused union of free stars, equipped with ships such as this, can do something about the Vaettir." His thought was grim. "And I know what something will be."

"It's strange," mused Beoric. "The aliens knew that they had caused most of the demon-myths of Earth. It did not occur to them that the myths of Faerie might also have an origin in reality. That I might be — an elf! That peris and nixies and kobolds and brownies and fairies and the Sea People and all the rest might, in a way, really exist. . . . And so man's old enemy, the shifty unreliable folk of the night, becomes in the end his saviour. And Alfheim changes from myth to — a real planet."

"Aye. And — well done, Beoric," said King Oberon.

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Old habitués of Gavagan's Bar will recall Professor Alvin Thott as the enviable possessor of a brass-blonde friend named Mrs. Jonas and the even more enviable discoverer of that remarkable beast, Elephas frumenti. *It was with that discovery indeed that we launched this joyously irresponsible series; and in this fourth account of Village vagaries we bring you the good and sufficient reason why Mrs. Jonas is not yet Mrs. Thott. There are some risks not to be incurred even for so fine a man as the Professor . . . And incidentally, how often is* your *wife compelled to visit the beauty parlor?*

More Than Skin Deep

by L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP & FLETCHER PRATT

MR. JEFFERS turned around. "Hello, Mrs. Jonas," he said. "You're looking so beautiful tonight I wouldn't mind buying you a drink."

"Thank you," said the brass-blonde, peering into the back of the room. "Isn't Alvin here yet? Then you can. A Presidente, please."

She placed one foot on the rail. "Now, now, Mrs. Jonas," said the bartender. "The most beautiful woman in the place you may be, and a Presidente you may have, but you know the rule of Gavagan's. We have tables for ladies."

"Oh, all right," said the brass-blonde. "Come on over and join me, Paul. I feel depressed and need company."

"What's the difficulty?" asked Jeffers, pulling out a chair for her. "The last dregs of a hangover or complications in your love-life?"

"Not in mine, but some friends of mine. Do you know the Stewarts? Andy used to come in here a lot. He's that advertising man with Crackerjack and Whiffenpoof or something like that, I can never keep track of those names."

Jeffers frowned. "I know him, yes. He's the big, solid chap who looks like a movie star. But I don't think I ever met his wife. What's happened to them?"

"They're getting a divorce," said Mrs. Jonas. "At least Betty-Jo is, and I don't see what else she can do, because he's just walked out on her and is living with a lady wrestler. It's a shame, too, because she was so devoted to him, and Mrs. . . . the woman who wrote me about it, says she still is, and wants him back. But I don't understand it, because he was perfectly crazy

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about her, too, and would hardly let her out of his sight before he went out there to take over the Chicago office of the agency. I wonder what could have happened. But I guess we never do understand what makes people fall into love with each other, or out of it, either. Nobody knew what Andy Stewart saw in Betty-Jo in the first place. She dresses like something that came out of a rag-bag, and she can't cook, and though she's quite nice, she's one of the most uninteresting people I ever met. They were married awfully quickly. That's probably why you didn't get to know her."

"If I had, I'd probably have thought she was wonderful, too," said Jeffers philosophically, sipping his beer. "With a low-cut dress and a couple of hours in a beauty-parlor, any woman can make herself look like the Queen of Sheba."

"It helps," admitted Mrs. Jonas, patting her back hair complacently. "In preparation for my date with Alvin tonight, I went to a new place, and I must say I think they did a good job on me. Mme. Lavoisin's, over on Arcade Street."

With a tinkling crash a glass shattered on the floor behind them. Jeffers and Mrs. Jonas looked round to see a smallish girl in a grey dress, with hair pulled straight back from her forehead, just standing up as Mr. Cohan hurried to mop up the debris of a spilled drink.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," said the girl. "But I couldn't help overhearing what you said. About Mme. Lavoisin's. And you mustn't, you really mustn't, go there again. That is, if you're planning on a date with a man. Believe me."

"I really don't see why not," said Mrs. Jonas, with a touch of hauteur.

"Because that's what happened to Betty-Jo Stewart. I knew her, too." The girl laid a hand which glittered with a diamond-studded wedding ring on Mrs. Jonas' arm. "And I'm afraid it's going to happen to me."

"If you'll explain," said Mrs. Jonas.

"Yes," said Jeffers. "Won't you sit down and have a drink with us?"

"Can I have another Presidente?" said Mrs. Jonas. "If Alvin gets here late, he deserves to find me fried."

The gray girl drew her coat around her shoulders and sat down. "All right," she said. "A whiskey sour. All right. I'll tell you. But you must promise never to breathe a word of it to a living soul. Both of you. Because that would be just as bad for me, if people found out and talked about it."

I'm Eloise Grady (she said). I knew Betty-Jo Stewart well, even before she was married. I even went to college with her, and it was just as you said. She's sweet and easy to get along with, but not very bright, and when looks were being passed around, someone forgot to tell her about it. In fact, the reason I got to know her so well was that we were the two plainest girls in the sorority house and never had any dates. No (she addressed Jeffers), you needn't tell me how beautiful I really am. I know exactly where I stand. And why.

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After we graduated, we both came here, but I didn't see so much of Betty-Jo for a while, and I couldn't have been more surprised when I got an invitation to her wedding. I thought she must have picked up some old widower, who really wanted a nurse to take care of his children. But when I saw the wedding itself I found I could be more surprised than at getting the announcement. It was held at the home of his parents. Everything was dripping with money, and frightfully social. But the big surprise was Andy Stewart himself. He was about the last person in the world you'd expect to fall for an ugly duckling like Betty-Jo. And she hadn't changed into any swan, either. But he used to follow her around with his eyes, as though she were the most beautiful object on earth.

After they were married, she began inviting me to the house quite a bit, for dinner-parties, or just to have a cocktail with her. I thought at first she wanted to do a little refined gloating over the catch she had made, but it wasn't that at all. She just wanted to talk, and she often seemed nervous in a way I couldn't understand.

("Didn't woman's intuition help you out any?" asked Jeffers.)

Not at the time, and just for that crack, you can buy me another whiskey sour (said Eloise Grady). The only time they even had anything approaching a disagreement was during that first winter of their marriage, when he wanted to take her to Florida for a couple of weeks and she wanted to stay home. She won, of course. It seemed to make her more nervous than usual. She had me over for cocktails the next day, and made me talk to her for a long time. All about being a business girl. You see, I'd just about made up my mind to live alone and like it then. All the dates I got were from men off the bottom of the deck. But Betty-Jo wouldn't tell me what was bothering her.

And she just stayed home. Andy wanted to go to the ski carnival at Lake Placid, and she let him go alone, finally. And the next summer, when he wanted to take a house at Southport for a couple of months, week-ending himself, she wouldn't do that either. It got to be a standing joke about her being such a town-mouse. There just wasn't anything else until the October party.

I call it *the* October party, because it was important to me. It was at it I met Walter — my husband, Walter Grady. Do you believe in love at first sight, Mrs. — did you tell me your name? — Mrs. Jonas? I never did, but the first time I met Walter I knew he was the man I wanted to marry. I also knew I didn't have a chance. He came with that Reinschloss girl, the blonde. Did you ever meet her? She won a beauty contest later and went to Hollywood as "The Society Star." And it was obvious that she wanted him, too.

I may have hinted something about it that night — I don't know. But anyway it couldn't have been more than a day or two later, when I was having lunch with Betty-Jo, that I really let myself go on the subject. We had

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a couple of cocktails before lunch and a brandy afterward, and I suppose it broke both of us down a little. I know I did tell her I'd given up on live alone and like it. If I could have Walter I wouldn't care for another thing in the world. And it's true — it's true. I still feel that way. Only —

(Eloise Grady drank and looked at the other two.) I remember her looking at me hard and then saying very soberly:

"Do you really want him enough to go through what I have?"

"What do you mean?" I asked her.

"Oh — missing out on trips, and — a lot of things."

I still didn't quite understand, but I just said: "Yes, I want him that much."

"All right," she said, "the Barnards are giving a dinner party next week and I know Walter's coming. I'll get them to ask you. But before you go, be sure to go to Mme. Lavoisin's in the afternoon and have a beauty treatment. Tell her I sent you, and it's a date with a man."

I accepted the invitation when it came, and I went to Mme. Lavoisin's. I can't say I was impressed by the place when I went in.

"What was the matter with it?" asked Mrs. Jonas.

"Didn't you get the impression that the place was somehow shabby? When you look directly at anything, it's clean enough and nice enough, but you always feel that there's something just at the edge of what you're looking at that isn't quite right."

"Well, sort of, when I first went in," admitted Mrs. Jonas. "And I didn't like that receptionist."

"The one with the big black cat sitting on the chair beside her?" said Eloise Grady. "She's nicely dressed and everything, but she has buck teeth."

"Yes," said Mrs. Jonas, "and the two end ones, right here, kind of pointed."

Eloise Grady gave a little sigh.

Well, I don't have to tell you (she went on). Or about Mme. Lavoisin herself. She has very black hair and looks as though she were about thirty when you first see her, and then you make up your mind that she's really much older, only just well turned out. The receptionist said she only took people by previous appointment, but I said I wanted a treatment that afternoon, and it was urgent, and Betty-Jo Stewart sent me.

She came out herself. "Is it a question of — meeting a man?" she asked.

I thought that was queer, but I said yes, and she took me into one of the booths herself. There wasn't anything extraordinary about the treatment, except that right in the middle of it a pin in her dress scratched me on the arm, so it bled a little.

("Why, that's what happened to me, too!" said Mrs. Jonas.)

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Yes, I know (said Eloise Grady). That's why I said — oh, well, after she finished with my hair, she said: "I think you will find that satisfactory. If the treatment gives the results you hope for and I expect, you had better come back. You will need more treatments."

I will say it gave me results even beyond what I could have hoped. I was a little late at the Barnards. Walter was already there with the Reinschloss girl, and they were talking together over cocktails. He turned around casually to say hello. Then I heard him give a sort of little gasp and do a quick double-take on me. I went on with the introductions, and a couple of minutes later, he dropped whatever he was doing and came and sat by me. It was wonderful. It was like — magic. He hardly looked at anyone else or talked to anyone else all evening long. The Reinschloss girl was furious. Walter called me up the next morning and wanted to take me to the ice carnival.

Naturally, I went to Mme. Lavoisin's before going with him. She was very discreet and didn't ask any questions when I said I had another date with the same man. Just gave me a treatment like before, and when she got through, said: "My special customers usually come back." I did keep coming back, too, every time I had a date with Walter, which got to be more and more frequently. About six weeks later, he asked me to marry him.

I told Mme. Lavoisin about it and that I wouldn't be in for a while, because Walter wanted to spend our honeymoon on a six weeks' cruise around the Caribbean. At the same time I said I was sure that her beauty treatments were responsible for everything and thanked her and gave her a rather large tip. Instead of being pleased, she looked worried. "My treatment will last for three weeks, perhaps," she said. "But after that —" and I couldn't get anything more out of her. But then I began to worry, I couldn't tell about what. I understood how Betty-Jo felt, and why she had talked to me so much. But I couldn't tell anybody about it, because there wasn't anything to tell, really. But I did persuade Walter to make it only a two-week honeymoon.

After we got back, I kept telling myself that this was absurd, that nothing could make that much difference. So one time, I didn't go to Mme. Lavoisin's for quite three weeks. Toward the end of it Walter kept asking me if I were ill, and then he'd start looking at me in the strangest way. Till I went back. When I was in the chair, Mme. Lavoisin didn't say anything but: "You mustn't neglect your looks like that, my dear. Men always like to have their wives look as nice as they did before they were married." So I kept on going back.

The next thing was Betty-Jo's birthday party. It was a big party. After dinner, over the coffee, Andy got up and made a little speech. He said he'd been saving this as a surprise, but this was a farewell party as well as a birthday party. The agency had placed him in charge of the Chicago office. But

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before he went out to take over, they had given him four months' leave. And he'd shared his wife with all of us for so long that he was going to have her all to himself for a while. So he had arranged for them to spend the time in a cabin in Tahiti.

He laid the tickets beside Betty-Jo's plate. Everyone applauded, but she looked so white we all thought she was going to faint. I was the only one at the table who understood why. And I'm one of the few people who understands what's happened to them now. And I'm worried myself, because Walter is talking about taking a trip to Europe. You see?

Mrs. Jonas finished her Presidente. "Yes, I think I see," she said.

The bus-boy came over to the table. "It's Professor Thott on the phone," he said. "He says he's awful sorry he's late, but there was a meeting of the trustees at the college, and he'll be right over, and do you want to talk to him now?"

"No," said Mrs. Jonas. "Not now. Tell him I'm very sorry, too, but I wasn't feeling well and decided to go home this evening. Tell him I'll see him later."

She got up. "Thank you," she said to Eloise Grady, and went out.

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Agatha Christie is as brilliant a mistress of the detective short story as of the mystery novel; and no more vexatious problem exists for the bibliographer of crime than the collation of the English and American collections of her shorts. But one of those volumes, never published in this country, falls almost entirely out of the detective domain and into the realm of fantasy: THE HOUND OF DEATH AND OTHER STORIES *(London: Odhams, 1933). Of the many unusual and even un-Christican items in that volume, we bring you, thanks to Christie-enthusiasts Peter Godfrey and Ellery Queen, a guignol tale with a concept as new and chilling as it is remorselessly logical.*

The Last Séance

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

RAOUL DAUBREUIL crossed the Seine humming a little tune to himself. He was a good-looking young Frenchman of about thirty-two, with a fresh-coloured face and a little black moustache. By profession he was an engineer. In due course he reached the Cardonet and turned in at the door of No. 17. The concierge looked out from her lair and gave him a grudging "Good-morning," to which he replied cheerfully. Then he mounted the stairs to the apartment on the third floor. As he stood there waiting for his ring at the bell to be answered he hummed once more his little tune. Raoul Daubreuil was feeling particularly cheerful this morning. The door was opened by an elderly Frenchwoman, whose wrinkled face broke into smiles when she saw who the visitor was.

"Good-morning, Monsieur."

"Good-morning, Elise," said Raoul.

He passed into the vestibule, pulling off his gloves as he did so.

"Madame expects me, does she not?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Ah, yes, indeed, Monsieur."

Elise shut the front door and turned towards him.

"If Monsieur will pass into the little *salon*, Madame will be with him in a few minutes. At the moment she reposes herself."

Raoul looked up sharply.

"Is she not well?"

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"*Well!*"

Elise gave a snort. She passed in front of Raoul and opened the door of the little *salon* for him. He went in and she followed him.

"*Well!*" she continued. "How should she be well, poor lamb? *Séances*, *Séances*, and always *Séances*. It is not right — not natural, not what the good God intended for us. For me, I say straight out, it is trafficking with the devil."

Raoul patted her on the shoulder reassuringly.

"There, there, Elise," he said soothingly, "do not excite yourself, and do not be too ready to see the devil in everything you do not understand."

Elise shook her head doubtingly.

"Ah, well," she grumbled under her breath, "Monsieur may say what he pleases, I don't like it. Look at Madame, every day she gets whiter and thinner, and the headaches!"

She held up her hands.

"Ah, no, it is not good, all this spirit business. Spirits indeed! All the good spirits are in Paradise, and the others are in Purgatory or . . ."

"Your view of the life after death is refreshingly simple, Elise," said Raoul as he dropped into a chair.

The old woman drew herself up.

"I am a good Catholic, Monsieur."

She crossed herself, went towards the door, then paused, her hand on the handle.

"Afterwards when you are married, Monsieur," she said pleadingly, "it will not continue — all this?"

Raoul smiled at her affectionately.

"You are a good faithful creature, Elise," he said, "and devoted to your mistress. Have no fear, once she is my wife, all this 'spirit business,' as you call it, will cease. For Madame Daubreuil there will be no more Séances."

Elise's face broke into smiles.

"Is it true what you say?" she asked eagerly.

The other nodded gravely.

"Yes," he said, speaking almost more to himself than to her. "Yes, all this must end. Simone has a wonderful gift and she has used it freely, but now she has done her part. As you have justly observed, Elise, day by day she gets whiter and thinner. The life of a medium is a particularly trying and arduous one, involving a terrible nervous strain. All the same, Elise, your mistress is the most wonderful medium in Paris — more, in France. People from all over the world come to her because they know that with her there is no trickery, no deceit."

Elise gave a snort of contempt.

"Deceit! Madame could not deceive a new-born babe if she tried."

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"She is an angel," said the young Frenchman with fervour. "And I — I shall do everything a man can to make her happy. You believe that?"

Elise drew herself up, and spoke with a certain simple dignity.

"I have served Madame for many years, Monsieur. With all respect I may say that I love her. If I did not believe that you adored her as she deserves to be adored — *eh bien*, Monsieur! I should be willing to tear you limb from limb."

Raoul laughed.

"Bravo, Elise! You are a faithful friend, and you must approve of me now that I have told you Madame is going to give up the spirits."

He expected the old woman to receive this pleasantry with a laugh, but somewhat to his surprise she remained grave.

"Supposing, Monsieur," she said hesitatingly, "the spirits will not give *her* up?"

Raoul stared at her.

"Eh! What do you mean?"

"I said," repeated Elise, "supposing the spirits will not give *her* up?"

"I thought you didn't believe in the spirits, Elise?"

"No more I do," said Elise stubbornly. "It is foolish to believe in them. All the same ——"

"Well?"

"It is difficult for me to explain, Monsieur. You see, me, I always thought that these mediums, as they call themselves, were just clever cheats who imposed on the poor souls who had lost their dear ones. But Madame is not like that. Madame is good. Madame is honest, and ——"

She lowered her voice and spoke in a tone of awe.

"*Things happen.* It is not trickery, things happen, and that is why I am afraid. For I am sure of this, Monsieur, it is not right. It is against nature and *le bon Dieu*, and *somebody will have to pay.*"

Raoul got up from his chair and came and patted her on the shoulder.

"Calm yourself, my good Elise," he said, smiling. "See, I will give you some good news. To-day is the last of these Séances; after to-day there will be no more."

"There *is* one to-day then?" asked the old woman suspiciously.

"The last, Elise, the last."

Elise shook her head disconsolately.

"Madame is not fit ——" she began.

But her words were interrupted, the door opened and a tall, fair woman came in. She was slender and graceful, with the face of a Botticelli Madonna. Raoul's face lighted up, and Elise withdrew quickly and discreetly.

"Simone!"

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He took both her long, white hands in his and kissed each in turn. She murmured his name very softly.

"Raoul, my dear one."

Again he kissed her hands and then looked intently into her face.

"Simone, how pale you are! Elise told me you were resting; you are not ill, my well-beloved?"

"No, not ill ——" she hesitated.

He led her over to the sofa and sat down on it beside her.

"But tell me then."

The medium smiled faintly.

"You will think me foolish," she murmured.

"I? Think you foolish? Never."

Simone withdrew her hand from his grasp. She sat perfectly still for a moment or two gazing down at the carpet. Then she spoke in a low, hurried voice.

"I am afraid, Raoul."

He waited for a minute or two expecting her to go on, but as she did not he said encouragingly:

"Yes, afraid of what?"

"Just afraid — that is all."

"But ——"

He looked at her in perplexity, and she answered the look quickly.

"Yes, it is absurd, isn't it, and yet I feel just that. Afraid, nothing more. I don't know what of, or why, but all the time I am possessed with the idea that something terrible — terrible — is going to happen to me. . . ."

She stared out in front of her. Raoul put an arm gently round her.

"My dearest," he said, "come, you must not give way. I know what it is, the strain, Simone, the strain of a medium's life. All you need is rest — rest and quiet."

She looked at him gratefully.

"Yes, Raoul, you are right. That is what I need, rest and quiet."

She closed her eyes and leant back a little against his arm.

"And happiness," murmured Raoul in her ear.

His arm drew her closer. Simone, her eyes still closed, drew a deep breath.

"Yes," she murmured, "yes. When your arms are round me I feel safe. I forget my life — the terrible life — of a medium. You know much, Raoul, but even you do not know all it means."

He felt her body grow rigid in his embrace. Her eyes opened again, staring in front of her.

"One sits in the cabinet in the darkness, waiting, and the darkness is terrible, Raoul, for it is the darkness of emptiness, of nothingness. Deliberately one

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gives oneself up to be lost in it. After that one knows nothing, one feels nothing, but at last there comes the slow, painful return, the awakening out of sleep, but so tired — so terribly tired."

"I know," murmured Raoul, "I know."

"So tired," murmured Simone again.

Her whole body seemed to droop as she repeated the words.

"But you are wonderful, Simone."

He took her hands in his, trying to rouse her to share his enthusiasm.

"You are unique — the greatest medium the world has ever known."

She shook her head, smiling a little at that.

"Yes, yes," Raoul insisted.

He drew two letters from his pocket.

"See here, from Professor Roche of the *Salpêtrière*, and this one from Dr. Genir at Nancy, both imploring that you will continue to sit for them occasionally."

"Ah, no!"

Simone sprang suddenly to her feet.

"I will not, I will not. It is to be all finished — all done with. You promised me, Raoul."

Raoul stared at her in astonishment as she stood wavering, facing him almost like a creature at bay. He got up and took her hand.

"Yes, yes," he said. "Certainly it is finished, that is understood. But I am so proud of you, Simone, that is why I mentioned those letters."

She threw him a swift sideways glance of suspicion.

"It is not that you will ever want me to sit again?"

"No, no," said Raoul, "unless perhaps you yourself would care to, just occasionally for these old friends ——"

But she interrupted him, speaking excitedly.

"No, no, never again. There is danger, I tell you. I can feel it, great danger."

She clasped her hands on her forehead a minute, then walked across to the window.

"Promise me never again," she said in a quieter voice over her shoulder.

Raoul followed her and put his arms round her shoulders.

"My dear one," he said tenderly, "I promise you after to-day you shall never sit again."

He felt the sudden start she gave.

"To-day," she murmured. "Ah, yes — I had forgotten Madame Exe."

Raoul looked at his watch.

"She is due any minute now; but perhaps, if you do not feel well ——"

Simone hardly seemed to be listening to him; she was following out her own train of thought.

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"She is — a strange woman, Raoul, a very strange woman. Do you know I — I have almost a horror of her."

"Simone!"

There was reproach in his voice, and she was quick to feel it.

"Yes, yes, I know, you are like all Frenchmen, Raoul. To you a mother is sacred and it is unkind of me to feel like that about her when she grieves so for her lost child. But — I cannot explain it, she is so big and black, and her hands — have you ever noticed her hands, Raoul? Great big strong hands, as strong as a man's. Ah!"

She gave a little shiver and closed her eyes. Raoul withdrew his arm and spoke almost coldly.

"I really cannot understand you, Simone. Surely you, a woman, should have nothing but sympathy for a mother bereft of her only child."

Simone made a gesture of impatience.

"Ah, it is you who do not understand, my friend! One cannot help these things. The first moment I saw her I felt ——"

She flung her hands out.

"*Fear.* You remember, it was a long time before I would consent to sit for her? I felt sure in some way she would bring me misfortune."

Raoul shrugged his shoulders.

"Whereas, in actual fact, she brought you the exact opposite," he said drily. "All the sittings have been attended with marked success. The spirit of the little Amélie was able to control you at once, and the materialisations have really been striking. Professor Roche ought really to have been present at the last one."

"Materialisations," said Simone in a low voice. "Tell me, Raoul (you know that I know nothing of what takes place while I am in the trance), are the materialisations really so wonderful?"

He nodded enthusiastically.

"At the first few sittings the figure of the child was visible in a kind of nebulous haze," he explained, "but at the last Séance ——"

"Yes?"

He spoke very softly.

"Simone, the child that stood there was an actual living child of flesh and blood. I even touched her — but seeing that the touch was acutely painful to you, I would not permit Madame Exe to do the same. I was afraid that her self-control might break down, and that some harm to you might result."

Simone turned away again towards the window.

"I was terribly exhausted when I woke," she murmured. "Raoul, are you sure — are you really sure that all this is *right?* You know what dear old Elise thinks, that I am trafficking with the devil?"

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She laughed rather uncertainly.

"You know what I believe," said Raoul gravely. "In the handling of the unknown there must always be danger, but the cause is a noble one, for it is the cause of Science. All over the world there have been martyrs of Science, pioneers who have paid the price so that others may follow safely in their footsteps. For ten years now you have worked for Science at the cost of a terrific nervous strain. Now your part is done, from to-day onward you are free to be happy."

She smiled at him affectionately, her calm restored. Then she glanced quickly up at the clock.

"Madame Exe is late," she murmured. "She may not come."

"I think she will," said Raoul. "Your clock is a little fast, Simone."

Simone moved about the room, rearranging an ornament here and there.

"I wonder who she is, this Madame Exe?" she observed. "Where she comes from, who her people are? It is strange that we know nothing about her."

Raoul shrugged his shoulders.

"Most people remain incognito if possible when they come to a medium," he observed. "It is an elementary precaution."

"I suppose so," agreed Simone listlessly.

A little china vase she was holding slipped from her fingers and broke to pieces on the tiles of the fireplace. She turned sharply on Raoul.

"You see," she murmured, "I am not myself. Raoul, would you think me very — very cowardly if I told Madame Exe I could not sit to-day?"

His look of pained astonishment made her redden.

"You promised, Simone ——" he began gently.

She backed against the wall.

"I won't do it, Raoul. I won't do it."

And again that glance of his, tenderly reproachful, made her wince.

"It is not of the money I am thinking, Simone, though you must realise that the money this woman has offered you for a last sitting is enormous — simply enormous."

She interrupted him defiantly.

"There are things that matter more than money."

"Certainly there are," he agreed warmly. "That is just what I am saying. Consider — this woman is a mother, a mother who has lost her only child. If you are not really ill, if it is only a whim on your part — you can deny a rich woman a caprice, can you deny a mother one last sight of her child?"

The medium flung her hands out despairingly in front of her.

"Oh, you torture me," she murmured. "All the same you are right. I will do as you wish, but I know now what I am afraid of — it is the word 'mother.' "

"Simone!"

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"There are certain primitive elementary forces, Raoul. Most of them have been destroyed by civilisation, but motherhood stands where it stood at the beginning. Animals — human beings, they are all the same. A mother's love for her child is like nothing else in the world. It knows no law, no pity, it dares all things and crushes down remorselessly all that stands in its path."

She stopped, panting a little, then turned to him with a quick, disarming smile.

"I am foolish to-day, Raoul. I know it."

"Lie down for a minute or two," he urged. "Rest till she comes."

"Very well." She smiled at him and left the room.

Raoul remained for a minute or two lost in thought, then he strode to the door, opened it, and crossed the little hall. He went into a room the other side of it, a sitting-room very much like the one he had left, but at one end was an alcove with a big arm-chair set in it. Heavy black velvet curtains were arranged so as to pull across the alcove. Elise was busy arranging the room. Close to the alcove she had set two chairs and a small round table. On the table was a tambourine, a horn, and some paper and pencils.

"The last time," murmured Elise with grim satisfaction. "Ah, Monsieur, I wish it were over and done with."

The sharp ting of an electric bell sounded.

"There she is, that great gendarme of a woman," continued the old servant. "Why can't she go and pray decently for her little one's soul in a church, and burn a candle to Our Blessed Lady? Does not the good God know what is best for us?"

"Answer the bell, Elise," said Raoul peremptorily.

She threw him a look, but obeyed. In a minute or two she returned ushering in the visitor.

"I will tell my mistress you are here, Madame."

Raoul came forward to shake hands with Madame Exe. Simone's words floated back to his memory.

"So big and so black."

She *was* a big woman, and the heavy black of French mourning seemed almost exaggerated in her case. Her voice when she spoke was very deep.

"I fear I am a little late, Monsieur."

"A few minutes only," said Raoul, smiling. "Madame Simone is lying down. I am sorry to say she is far from well, very nervous and overwrought."

Her hand, which she was just withdrawing, closed on his suddenly like a vice.

"But she will sit?" she demanded sharply.

"Oh, yes, Madame."

Madame Exe gave a sigh of relief, and sank into a chair, loosening one of the heavy black veils that floated round her.

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"Ah, Monsieur!" she murmured, "you cannot imagine, you cannot conceive the wonder and the joy of these Séances to me! My little one! My Amélie! To see her, to hear her, even — perhaps — yes, perhaps to be even able to — stretch out my hand and touch her."

Raoul spoke quickly and peremptorily.

"Madame Exe — how can I explain? — on no account must you do anything except under my express directions, otherwise there is the gravest danger."

"Danger to me?"

"No, Madame," said Raoul, "to the medium. You must understand that the phenomena that occur are explained by Science in a certain way. I will put the matter very simply, using no technical terms. A spirit, to manifest itself, has to use the actual physical substance of the medium. You have seen the vapour of fluid issuing from the lips of the medium. This finally condenses and is built up into the physical semblance of the spirit's dead body. But this ectoplasm we believe to be the actual substance of the medium. We hope to prove this some day by careful weighing and testing — but the great difficulty is the danger and pain which attends the medium on any handling of the phenomena."

Madame Exe had listened to him with close attention.

"That is very interesting, Monsieur. Tell me, shall not a time come when the materialisation shall advance so far that it shall be capable of detachment from its parent, the medium?"

"That is a fantastic speculation, Madame."

She persisted.

"But, on the facts, not impossible?"

"Quite impossible to-day."

"But perhaps in the future?"

He was saved from answering, for at that moment Simone entered. She looked languid and pale, but had evidently regained entire control of herself. She came forward and shook hands with Madame Exe, though Raoul noticed the faint shiver that passed through her as she did so.

"I regret, Madame, to hear that you are indisposed," said Madame Exe.

"It is nothing," said Simone rather brusquely. "Shall we begin?"

She went to the alcove and sat down in the armchair. Suddenly Raoul in his turn felt a wave of fear pass over him.

"You are not strong enough," he exclaimed. "We had better cancel the Séance. Madame Exe will understand."

"Monsieur!"

Madame Exe rose indignantly.

"Yes, yes, it is better not, I am sure of it."

"Madame Simone promised me one last sitting."

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"That is so," agreed Simone quietly, "and I am prepared to carry out my promise."

"I hold you to it, Madame," said the other woman.

"I do not break my word," said Simone coldly. "Do not fear, Raoul," she added gently, "after all, it is for the last time — the last time, thank God."

At a sign from her Raoul drew the heavy black curtains across the alcove. He also pulled the curtains of the windows so that the room was in semi-obscurity. He indicated one of the chairs to Madame Exe and prepared himself to take the other. Madame Exe, however, hesitated.

"You will pardon me, Monsieur, but — you understand I believe absolutely in your integrity and in that of Madame Simone. All the same, so that my testimony may be the more valuable, I took the liberty of bringing this with me."

From her handbag she drew a length of fine cord.

"Madame!" cried Raoul. "This is an insult!"

"A precaution."

"I repeat it is an insult."

"I don't understand your objection, Monsieur," said Madame Exe coldly. "If there is no trickery you have nothing to fear."

Raoul laughed scornfully.

"I can assure you that I have nothing to fear, Madame. Bind me hand and foot if you will."

His speech did not produce the effect he hoped, for Madame Exe merely murmured unemotionally:

"Thank you, Monsieur," and advanced upon him with her roll of cord.

Suddenly Simone from behind the curtain gave a cry.

"No, no, Raoul, don't let her do it."

Madame Exe laughed derisively.

"Madame is afraid," she observed sarcastically.

"Yes, I am afraid."

"Remember what you are saying, Simone," cried Raoul. "Madame Exe is apparently under the impression that we are charlatans."

"I must make sure," said Madame Exe grimly.

She went methodically about her task, binding Raoul securely to his chair.

"I must congratulate you on your knots, Madame," he observed ironically when she had finished. "Are you satisfied now?"

Madame Exe did not reply. She walked round the room examining the panelling of the walls closely. Then she locked the door leading into the hall, and, removing the key, returned to her chair.

"Now," she said in an indescribable voice, "I am ready."

The minutes passed. From behind the curtain the sound of Simone's breath-

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ing became heavier and more stertorous. Then it died away altogether, to be succeeded by a series of moans. Then again there was silence for a little while, broken by the sudden clattering of the tambourine. The horn was caught up from the table and dashed to the ground. Ironic laughter was heard. The curtains of the alcove seemed to have been pulled back a little, the medium's figure was just visible through the opening, her head fallen forward on her breast. Suddenly Madame Exe drew in her breath sharply. A ribbon-like stream of mist was issuing from the medium's mouth. It condensed and began gradually to assume a shape, the shape of a little child.

"Amélie! My little Amélie!"

The hoarse whisper came from Madame Exe. The hazy figure condensed still further. Raoul stared almost incredulously. Never had there been a more successful materialisation. Now, surely it was a real child, a real flesh and blood child standing there.

"*Maman!*"

The soft childish voice spoke.

"My child!" cried Madame Exe. "My child!"

She half-rose from her seat.

"Be careful, Madame," cried Raoul warningly.

The materialisation came hesitatingly through the curtains. It was a child. She stood there, her arms held out.

"*Maman!*"

"Ah!" cried Madame Exe.

Again she half-rose from her seat.

"Madame," cried Raoul, alarmed, "the medium ——"

"I must touch her," cried Madame Exe hoarsely.

She moved a step forward.

"For God's sake, Madame, control yourself," cried Raoul.

He was really alarmed now.

"Sit down at once."

"My little one, I must touch her."

"Madame, I command you, sit down!"

He was writhing desperately with his bonds, but Madame Exe had done her work well; he was helpless. A terrible sense of impending disaster swept over him.

"In the name of God, Madame, sit down!" he shouted. "Remember the medium."

Madame Exe paid no attention to him. She was like a woman transformed. Ecstasy and delight showed plainly in her face. Her outstretched hand touched the little figure that stood in the opening of the curtains. A terrible moan came from the medium.

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"My God!" cried Raoul. "My God! This is terrible. The medium ——"

Madame Exe turned on him with a harsh laugh.

"What do I care for your medium?" she cried. "I want my child."

"You are mad!"

"My child, I tell you. Mine! My own! My own flesh and blood! My little one come back to me from the dead, alive and breathing."

Raoul opened his lips, but no words would come. She was terrible, this woman! Remorseless, savage, absorbed by her own passion. The baby lips parted, and for the third time the same word echoed:

"*Maman!*"

"Come then, my little one," cried Madame Exe.

With a sharp gesture she caught up the child in her arms. From behind the curtains came a long-drawn scream of utter anguish.

"Simone!" cried Raoul. "Simone!"

He was aware vaguely of Madame Exe rushing past him, of the unlocking of the door, of retreating footsteps down the stairs.

From behind the curtains there still sounded the terrible high long-drawn scream — such a scream as Raoul had never heard. It died away in a horrible kind of gurgle. Then there came the thud of a body falling. . . .

Raoul was working like a maniac to free himself from his bonds. In his frenzy he accomplished the impossible, snapping the rope by sheer strength. As he struggled to his feet, Elise rushed in, crying, "Madame!"

"Simone!" cried Raoul.

Together they rushed forward and pulled the curtain.

Raoul staggered back.

"My God!" he murmured. "Red — all red. . . ."

Elise's voice came beside him, harsh and shaking.

"So Madame is dead. It is ended. But tell me, Monsieur, what has happened. *Why is Madame all shrunken away — why is she half her usual size? What has been happening here?*"

"I do not know," said Raoul.

His voice rose to a scream.

"I do not know. I do not know. But I think — I am going mad. . . . Simone! Simone!"

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In the far future, when all knowledge about all things may seemingly have been accumulated by man, it will be most difficult for the academician to find a properly unexplored subject for his thesis. The protagonist of this mad tale, one Acleptos, solved that problem by doing research on the invocation of demons. In addition to a real, live demon, his experiments produced rather startling results: he learned the true nature of the devil's sickness, the limitations of omniscience, and divers other matters, all of great interest to his world — and of high amusement to you!

The Devil Was Sick

by BRUCE ELLIOTT

It had been aeons since a really violent patient had been forcibly carried across the threshold of the Sane Asylum. So much time had passed since the brave motto was first cast in endlessly enduring crysto-metal and placed at the entrance door that passersby no longer paused to read the words. A VILLAIN IS JUST A SICK HERO. . . . Once a brave challenge to the unknown, passing time had changed them to a cliché. The motto had been proved true and therefore it was no longer worth consideration. But the words stayed on — until the day that Acleptos took chisel in hand and changed two of them.

It began because the problem of finding a new subject for a thesis had become harder to solve than getting a degree. Acleptos, by dint of a great deal of research, had found three subjects which he hoped the Machine would accept as being original. He gulped a little as he presented his list to the all-seeing eye of the calculator. The list read: "Activated sludge and what the ancients did about it." "The downfall of democracy and why it came about." "Devils and demons."

The Machine barely paused before it said, "In 4357 Jac Bard wrote the definitive work on activated sludge. Two hundred years later the last unknown component in regard to the downfall of democracy was analyzed to the utmost by the historian Hermios." There was a tiny wait. Acleptos held his breath. If his last subject had been collected, annotated and written about in its entirety it might mean twenty years' work finding more possible subjects. The Machine said, "There are two aspects of devils and demons that have not been presented to me so far. These are, whether they were real or hallucinatory, and if real, what they were. If hallucinatory, how brought about."

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New life and hope surged through Acleptos. He braced his narrow shoulders and walked away from the Machine. At last . . . after so many years, he now had a chance. Of course, the thought brought him up short, there was still a chance that he might not be able to throw any new light on the problem of the reality of devils and demons. But that at least was something he could work on. The years spent at the reels, the work he had done going through almost all provinces of human knowledge had at last paid off.

A decade ago, the last time he had presented a list to the Machine, he had been so sure that he had found a subject when he had discovered references in some old reels to something or someone who was referred to as "God." It had been the capitalization of the "g" that had caught his eye in the first place. But the Machine had given him an endless number of theses on the subject, including one written about a thousand years prior that had proved conclusively the non-existence of such a being. This thesis, the Machine felt, had ended all future speculations on the subject.

Out of curiosity Acleptos had checked the reference and was in complete accord, as he always was, with the Machine's summation.

It had been a stroke of genius thinking of the antithesis to God. Acleptos grinned to himself. There was no holding him back now. He would do his research, get his degree and then . . . then there would be no holding him back. He would be able to quit the Earth and go on to his next step. He threw his head back and looked at the sky. To the stars, that was the way it went. You were earth-bound till you had done some original piece of research, but with that finished you were allowed to migrate anywhere you wanted to go.

There was a planet out back of Alpha Centauri that she had chosen. And she had promised that no matter how long the time, she would wait till he came. He didn't think he had ever been so depressed in his long life as he had been on the day that the Machine had passed on her thesis. For a long while it had seemed as if he had lost her completely. But now the years no longer seemed endless. His search had been fruitful.

Whistling, he entered the reel room and got to work. Pressing the button that was lettered d-e-m to d-e-v he waited until the intricate relay system had performed its function. With a low clatter the needed reels popped out of the pneumatic tube.

Three weeks later he felt that he had as much knowledge on the subject of demons, devils and the long-legged-beasties-that-go-bump-in-the-night as any human had ever had. He shook his head. To think that man had ever been so low on the scale as to believe such things. Incredible. But then, it was long ago.

He had been forced to work the translating machine overtime. Latin had been the language of much of the lore. To think that after all his years of studying he had never even heard of demons before! What garbage! He was indig-

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nant to think that there had ever been a time when *homo sapiens* had believed such trash.

He shrugged. Time to get to work on the basic problem. His closest friend, Ttom, walked into the research laboratory. He had been so busy he had not even checked with Ttom. He hadn't even told him of his success in finding a subject!

"What in. . . ." Ttom looked around the spotless green room. On the crystal table a stuffed alligator eyed him unblinkingly. Resting against the horny hide were oddly shaped vessels; surrounding the saurian were boxes and trays of powders. On the wall a weather machine was saying: "The moon will be full tonight and . . ." Acleptos switched it off.

"You've come just in time to watch!" he said jubilantly.

"Watch what?" Ttom's round face puckered up like a fat baby's. He said, "You've done it! You've found a subject! Acleptos! I'm so glad!"

"Thanks," Acleptos said, "and you?"

"Still nothing." But Ttom was too happy for his friend to remain dejected. He asked, "What in the universe did you stumble on?"

"Devils and demons," Acleptos said and went back to mixing some of the powders on the table.

"What are they?"

"A primitive superstition. My job is to find out if they were real, or if they were just another name for bad, or sick people."

"How are you going to do it? What are all those odds and ends?" Ttom asked.

"I'm just going to follow the formula in some old manuscripts and see what happens. It's deadly dull, really, but it's a subject!"

He had worked hard getting all the bizarre things together that the manuscripts called for, but — he looked at the table — he now had everything he needed. Tonight, at midnight, with the moon full. . . . Aloud he said, "A lot of elements go into the 'conjuration of demons'. If you want to wait around and watch you may find it interesting."

"Sure. I have nothing to do. I thought I had a lead but as usual someone else had beaten me to it. Acleptos," Ttom asked, "what's going to happen when there are no more fields of human knowledge, when there are no new subjects to explore, when no more theses may be written?"

"I wondered about that, often, until I discovered demons. . . . But I think it's a long way off in the future and the Machine will take care of that eventuality when it arises, I'm sure."

"I'm beginning to think the time is now. Really, Acleptos, you're the first one who's found a subject in five years!" Ttom tried to keep any note of bitterness out of his voice.

"I know what the Machine would say, Ttom." Acleptos mixed some red

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liquid into a tube and added some violet powder to it. "The Machine would say that if I found a subject, so can you."

Ttom groaned. "I guess you're right. However, let's forget about me. What happens now?"

"Nothing until midnight. Then, when the moon is full, I will chant certain words, light those black fatty things . . . they're called candles, and then I wait for a devil or a demon to appear." They both laughed.

At midnight, with smiles still pulling at the corners of their mouths, Ttom sat outside the peculiar thing that Acleptos had drawn on the floor. It was called a pentacle. Acleptos had placed a black candle in each of its angles. He had burned foul-smelling chemicals and he was now chanting in some gibberish.

It was amusing at first, but as time dragged on both men became impatient. Nothing happened. Acleptos stopped chanting and said, "Well, I know the answer to the Machine's first question. Demons are hallucinatory and not real."

That was when it happened.

There was a smell in the room much worse than the chemicals. Then a sort of grey luminescence coalesced near the diagram on the floor.

Acleptos yelled, "Ttom, I forgot. The old books say that you have to be inside the pentacle to be protected from . . . whatever this is!"

Leaping to his feet, Ttom jumped for the line nearest him. Just before he got there the thing had become solid. It raised its folded lids and when its eyes hit him there was such concentrated malevolence in them that Ttom felt something he had never experienced before. It was only because of his reading that he knew that the sensation was something called fear.

The thing said, "Finally."

Even its voice grated on the nerves. Acleptos was stunned. He had performed the experiment because that was the way one found out things, but that it should be successful was beyond his wildest imaginings.

The thing rubbed its odd fingers which had far too many joints for comfort and said, "All these thousands of years. Waiting . . . Waiting in the greyness for a call that never came. At first I thought that He had won — but if that had been the case I would not have been."

It shrugged its scaly shoulders and opened its red eyes more fully. They were fascinating. The pupils alternately waxed and waned like little crimson moons. It looked from Acleptos to Ttom and said, "So nothing has changed. The adept and the sacrifice, just the way it used to be." Its chuckle was unseemly.

"And what reward," the thing looked at Acleptos, "do you want in exchange for this present?"

Ttom had never been called a present before and he found that he did not care for it particularly.

It did not wait for Acleptos to answer. Instead it rubbed its too-long fingers

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together. The grating sound was the only one in the room. It eyed Acleptos and said, "I see. Nothing *has* changed. A woman. Very well, here she is."

It made an odd series of gestures in the air and — before Acleptos could clear his throat to say no — she was there. She looked frightened. Her hair was as lovely as he remembered it. So was her body. She was naked, as he would have predicted since the planet she had chosen was a warm one. There was no shame in her pose, just fear.

"Send her back! How dare you drag her across interstellar space! You fool! You might have killed her!" He had no fear of the thing now. His only fear was for his beloved. She vanished as she had appeared.

The thing grumbled. "I didn't see that you loved her. I thought it was just sex you wanted." It turned its eyes back towards Acleptos. "Gold? They always want gold. . . ." It began to make the stereotyped gestures again.

Acleptos realized that he had lost control of the situation which was ridiculous. He cleared his throat and said, "Enough!"

The thing paused in its occupation, and if it had been able to show any expression at all it would have been surprise. It said, "Now what? How can I get gold for you if you keep interrupting?"

Acleptos was angry. Anger, like the fear that had preceded it, was a new emotion. He said, "Stand perfectly still. I am the master and you the slave." That was in the directions he had read. He didn't quite know what a master or a slave was, but the book had seemed to specify those words.

The thing held its misshapen head still as its eyes wandered over Ttom's body hungrily.

Controlling his new-found emotion Acleptos said, "You don't seem to understand. I don't want any gold, whatever that is."

Ttom said, "I remember that word from my reading. The ancients used to change it into lead or some valuable metal like that."

Acleptos went on, "And I didn't want her dragged back from Alpha Centauri!"

"Power!" the thing said and this time it almost seemed to grin. "That never fails. If they're too old for sex and too rich for gold, they always want power." Its hands began to move again.

"STOP!" Acleptos yelled, for the first time in his life.

The thing froze.

Acleptos said, "Don't do that again, it makes me . . . uneasy! I don't want power and don't tell me what it is because I'm not interested. Now just stand there and answer some questions."

The thing seemed to shrink a little. It said almost querulously, "But . . . what did you summon me for? If you don't want anything from me, I can't take anything from you. . . ." It rolled its eyes at Ttom.

"I just want some information. How long do you crea . . . devils live?"

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"Live? Forever, of course."

"And what is your function?"

"To tempt man from the path of righteousness."

The words came out clearly enough but Acleptos just couldn't understand what they meant. However, it was all being recorded so he would be able to go back over it all and make sense of it later.

"Why would you want to do that?" Acleptos asked.

The demon peered at him as though doubting his sanity. It said, "In order that man have free will. He must be able to choose between good and evil."

"What are they? Those words, good and evil?"

The demon sat down on its heels, disregarding the spurs that sank into its own buttocks. It said, "All those years . . . sitting in the greyness and to be summoned for this." It shook its head. Suddenly it seemed to come to some kind of decision. Springing to its feet it made a dash for Ttom.

Simultaneously Acleptos raised the force gun he had kept by his side. He pressed the button. The creature froze and then fell face forward on the floor.

Ttom gulped. He said, "I thought you were never going to use that. I'll call the Sane Asylum and have them send for this poor, sick creature right away."

Nodding, Acleptos said, "This has turned out to be much more interesting than I would have predicted." He busied himself with his thoughts till the ambu-bus arrived. It was the first hurry call the Asylum had had in a century but the machines functioned perfectly.

Ttom and Acleptos watched the robots pick up the thing and cradle it in their metal arms. They went along as the androids placed it in the ambu-bus and flew towards the Asylum.

Halfway there Acleptos spoke for the first time. He said, "Do you see the terrible irony implicit in all this?"

"What do you mean?" Ttom still stared at the thing which lay stretched out as though in death.

"These devils, do you realize what they are?" The words spilled out of Acleptos. "They're just other-dimensional beings. Somehow, sometime, a human back in medieval times stumbled on the mathematics of causing them to cross dimensions. Not knowing what he was doing, shrouded in superstition, he thought that the mumbo jumbo was what called them up. He didn't realize that the diagram and the heat of the candles and words of the chant all combined to make a key to open the lock of that other dimension."

"It sounds reasonable but where is there any irony in that?"

Acleptos sounded ready to weep. He said, "Don't you see? Here was humanity struggling through the centuries when all the time they had darker brothers right near them who were immortal — who could conquer space by merely setting their hands in the right pattern. . . . But man, blinded by his

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superstitious beliefs, was unable to learn from these 'devils'. The worst irony is, however, that the 'devils' couldn't help man because they are idiots. . . ."

Ttom nodded. "An almost imbecile race with incredible powers living right next door to us and we never knew it. The Machine is right, there is much more for us to learn. I was wrong in thinking that all things are known."

Either the force gun wasn't set heavily enough or the "devil" had amazing recuperative powers, Acleptos thought, for as they got out of the ambu-bus the creature unfroze. It screamed as the robots tried to carry it across the threshold of the Sane Asylum.

It struggled so that even the metal muscles that animated the robots were strained. Acleptos saw its hands suddenly begin to move in that pattern.

He yelled to the robots who were restraining it, "Hold its hands!"

The metallic hands folded over the madly writhing too-many jointed fingers and the thing stopped its struggling. Ahead, a door opened and one of the doctors walked towards them.

He said, "What in the world is that?" As Acleptos explained, Ttom ran his fingers over the words of the motto on the door. He saw the words, his fingers felt them, but he had seen them too often. They didn't register on his mind.

When Acleptos finished, the doctor said, "I see. Well, we'll have it straightened out in no time. It will be quite a challenge trying to bring an other-dimensional creature to its senses!"

Acleptos asked, "Do you think it is sick or just stupid?"

The doctor smiled. "Sick, I'm sure. No well being would behave the way you have described its actions. Would you like to watch?"

"Of course. I am more than interested." Acleptos linked his arm in Ttom's. "Imagine," he said, "if we can cure this one, it will mean communication with a whole race of the creatures. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Acleptos," Ttom sounded worried, "there's one thing we haven't considered. In all my reading, in all the data we have on the whole universe and all its creatures, I have never before heard of any that are immortal. Had you thought of that?"

"Yes, but it's just another proof of how right the Machine is in its assertion that we don't know everything. This is the most exciting thing that has ever happened to me! I can't wait till I tell her about it. Imagine how surprised she'll be to find that it was not a dream, that she was really here, warped through space and time by a sick creature who has lived forever. . . ."

In the operating room there were no scalpels, no sponges, no clamps. The robots had a firm grip on the thing as they stretched it out on the table. They never relaxed their hold on its hands.

The doctor picked up an instrument with an "S" shaped lens protruding from the front of it. A pulsating light came from it. The doctor bathed the

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thing in the light. He said, "This will only take a moment. That is, if it's going to work. If not, there are other alternatives."

The doctor's voice suddenly failed him. Acleptos backed away from the table. Ttom gasped. Only the robots were unimpressed.

For the thing was changing. Wherever the lambent light touched the creature, its scales fell away.

The doctor gasped to the robots, "Release your hold."

As they did so the creature arose in glory. A golden light played around its suddenly soft, sweet face. It stepped away from them towards the window. Standing on the window-sill, a smile played around its lips like a valedictory. It poised there for a moment and then spread its huge white wings.

It said, "*Pax vobiscum.*" The wings swirled and it was gone, wrapped in serenity.

That is why Acleptos changed the words of the motto in front of the Sane Asylum. They now read: A DEVIL IS JUST A SICK ANGEL.

Of course, the Machine has stopped. For its basis and its strength was infallibility. And it was wrong about the thesis concerning the existence of God with a capital G.

Note:

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It is a source of lasting satisfaction to us that this magazine published Richard Matheson's first story, the unforgettable Born of Man and Woman. *Happily, his talent seems inexhaustible; here is one of several Matheson tales we have in store for you — one with an altogether different technique and approach from his perceptive study of a mutant's tragedy, but a story that demonstrates equally well the Matheson ability to hint at terror too awful to be told directly.*

Through Channels

by RICHARD MATHESON

Click

Swish swish swish

All set, Sergeant?

Set.

OK. This recording made on January fifteenth, nineteen fifty two, twenty third precinct police . . .

Swish

. . . in the presence of Detective James Taylor and, uh, Sergeant Louis Ferazzio.

Swish swish

Name, please.

Huh?

What's your name, son?

My name?

Come on, son, we're trying to help you.

Swish

L-Leo.

Last name.

I d-don't . . . Leo.

What's your last name, son?

Vo . . . Vo . . .

All right, son. Take it easy.

V-Vogel.

Leo Vogel. That it?

Yeah.

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Address?
T-twenny two thirty, avena J.
Age?
I'm . . . almost. Where's . . . my ma?
swish swish
Turn it off a minute, Sergeant.
Right.
click

click
swish
All right, son. OK now?
Y-yeah. But where . . .
You're how old?
Fi-fifteen.
Now, uh, where were you last night from six o'clock till you went home?
I was . . . at . . . at the show. Ma give . . . give me the dough.
How come you didn't stay home to watch television with your parents?
'Cause. Because . . .
Yes?
The Le-Lenottis was comin' over to watch it with them.
They came often?
N-no. It was the first time they'd . . . ever come.
Uh-huh. So your mother sent you to the movies?
Y-yeah.
Sergeant, give the kid some of that coffee. And see if you can find him a blanket.
Right away, chief.
Now, uh, son. What time did you get out of the movies?
Time? I . . . don't know what time.
About nine thirty, would you say?
I guess. I don't know . . . wh-what time. All I . . .
Yes?
Nothin'.
Well, you saw the show only once, didn't you?
swish
Huh?
You only saw it once. You didn't see any picture twice, did you?
No. No, I only seen it once.
OK. That would make it, ahh . . .
swish

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. . . roughly about nine thirty, then, that you got out of the movies. You went home right away?

Yeah . . . I mean no.

Where did you stop?

I had a coke at the . . . at the drugstore.

I see. Then you went home.

Ye —

swish

. . . yeah, then I went home.

The house was dark?

Yeah. But . . . they never used no lights when they watched TV.

Uh-huh. You went in?

Y-yeah.

Take a sip of that coffee, son, before it gets cold. Take it easy, take it easy. Don't choke on it. There. OK?

Yeah.

All right then. Now . . . Oh, good. Put it over his shoulders, Sergeant. There we go. Better?

Mmmm.

OK. Let's get on with it. And believe me, son, this is no more fun for us than it is for you. We saw it too.

I want mama. I want her. Please, can I . . .

Oh. What did . . . well, shut it off, Sergeant. Here, kid. You don't have a handkerchief, do you? Here. Did you shut it off, Sergeant?

Oh. Right away.

swish click

click

When you went in, was there anything . . . peculiar?

What?

You told us last night you smelled something.

Yeah. It . . . it . . . There was a funny smell.

Anything you know?

Huh?

Did it smell like anything you ever smelled before?

No. It wasn't much. Not in the . . . hall.

All right. So you went in the livingroom?

No. No. I went . . . Ma. Can I . . .

swish swish

Come on, son, snap out of it. We know you've had a bad time. But we're trying to help.

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swish swish swish

You, uh, didn't go in the livingroom. Didn't you think you should mention that smell?

I . . . h-heard the set on and . . .

Set?

The TV set. I thought — I figured they was still watchin'.

Yeah.

And ma didn't like me to . . . b-bust in on them. So I went up to my room so's I wouldn't . . . you know.

Bother them.

Y-yeah.

OK. How long were you up there?

I was . . . I don't know how long. Maybe an hour.

And?

There . . . wasn't no sounds downstairs.

Nothing at all?

No. There wasn't nothing at all.

Didn't that make you suspicious?

Yeah. Well, I figured . . . they'd . . . laugh at somethin' or talk loud or . . .

Dead quiet.

Yeah. Dead quiet.

Did you go down then?

L-later I went. I was goin' to bed. I figured I . . .

You wanted to say goodnight.

Yeah. I . . .

swish

You went down and opened the livingroom door?

Yeah, I — Yeah.

What did you see?

I . . . I . . . Oh, can't ya . . . I want my ma. Lemme alone. I want her!

Kid! Hold him, Sergeant. Take it easy!

swish swish

I'm sorry, kid. Did it hurt? I had to calm you. I know . . . how you feel, Leo. We saw it too. We feel sick and . . . awful too.

swish

Just a few more questions and we'll take you to your aunt's. Now first. The television set. Was it on?

Yeah. It was on.

And you . . . smelled something?

Yeah. Like in the hall. Only worse. Only lots worse.

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That smell.

That smell. Dead. A dead stink. Like a pile o' dead . . . dead . . . I don't know. Garbage. Piles of it.

No one was talking?

No, there was nothin'. 'Cept the TV.

What was on it?

I already told ya.

I know, I know. Tell us again. For the record.

It was — like I said — just them letters. Great big letters.

What were they?

F . . . uh . . . F - E - E - D.

F - E - E - D?

Y-yeah. Big crooked-like letters.

You'd seen them before?

Yeah. I told ya. They was on our set all the time . . . Not all the time. Plenty though.

Your parents never wondered about it?

No. They said . . . they figured it was a sort of commercial. You know.

But the things you saw?

I don't know. Ma said . . . it was for kids. Some, I mean.

What did you see?

swish swish swish

Sort of . . . mouths. Big ones. Wide. Open, all open. They wasn't p-people.

swish

What did it look like? I mean, couldn't you tell what it was?

No. I mean. They was like . . . bugs, maybe. Or maybe . . . w-worms. Big ones. All mouths. Wide open.

All right.

swish

You, uh, said the letters flashed on, then off, and you saw the . . . the mouths, and then the letters again?

Yeah. Like that.

This happen every night?

Yeah.

Same time?

No. Different times.

Between programs?

No. Any time.

Was it always the same channel?

No. All different ones. No matter which one we had . . . we seen them.

And . . .

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I wanna go. Can't I . . . Ma! Where is she? I want her. I want her.

swish click

click

A few more questions, Leo, and that's it. Now, you said your parents never had the set checked?

No, I told you. They thought it was —

All right.

swish

You went in the livingroom. You said something about slipping, didn't you?

Yeah. On that stuff.

What stuff?

I don't know. Greasy stuff. Like hot grease. It stunk awful.

And then you . . . you found . . .

swish

I found them. Ma. And pa. And the Lenottis. They was . . . Ohhhh, I wanna . . .

Leo! What about the set, Leo? What about it?

Huh, what?

The picture on the set. You said something about it.

I, yeah, I . . .

It was the letters, wasn't it, Leo?

Yeah, yeah. Them letters. Them big crooked letters. They was up there. On the set. I seen them. And . . . and . . .

What?

One of the E's. It kinda . . . faded. It went away. And . . . and . . .

What, Leo?

The other letters. They come together. So . . . so there was only three. And . . . and it was a word.

swish swish swish

Take him to his aunt, Sergeant.

And the tube went black . . . .

All right, Leo. The sergeant'll take you ho — to your aunt's.

I turned on the lights.

All right, Leo.

I turned on the light! Ma! *MAMA!*

click

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The problems of inter-galactic sociology are incisively extrapolated by Idris Seabright in this brief, yet comprehensive study of a culture uneasily propped up by "bread and circuses." For all the luminous beauty of her story-telling, it is a poignant picture that Miss Seabright sketches — that of a once creative citizenry using its triumphs to gratify no more than a lust for vicarious bloodletting. You will, of course, be struck by the parallel between this empire of the future and that one of our not too remote past, the Roman. One hopes no actual future culture will fail to heed the lesson the Romans imperially ignored: even slaves and gladiators are human and can love.

?

by IDRIS SEABRIGHT

KERR used to go into the tepidarium of the identification bureau to practice singing. The tepidarium was a big room, filled almost from wall to wall by the pool of glittering preservative, and he liked its acoustics. The bodies of the bird people would drift a little back and forth in the pellucid fluid as he sang, and he liked to look at them. If the tepidarium was a little morbid as a place to practice singing, it was (Kerr used to think) no more morbid than the rest of the world in which he was living. When he had sung for as long as he thought good for his voice — he had no teacher — he would go to one of the windows and watch the luminous trails that meant the bird people were fighting again. The trails would float down slowly against the night sky as if they were made of star dust. But after Kerr met Rhysha, he stopped all that.

Rhysha came to the bureau one evening just as he was going on duty. She had come to claim a body. The bodies of the bird people often stayed in the bureau for a considerable time. Ordinary means of transportation were forbidden to the bird people because of their extra-terrestrial origin, and it was hard for them to get to the bureau to identify their dead. Rhysha made the identification — it was her brother — paid the bureau's fee from a worn purse, and indicated on the proper form the disposal she wanted made of the body. She was quiet and controlled in her grief. Kerr had watched the televised battles of the bird people once or twice, but this was the first time he had ever seen one of them alive and face to face. He looked at her with interest and curiosity, and then with wonder and delight.

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The most striking thing about Rhysha was her glowing, deep turquoise plumage. It covered her from head to heels in what appeared to be a clinging velvet cloak. The coloring was so much more intense than that of the bodies in the tepidarium that Kerr would have thought she belonged to a different species than they.

Her face, under the golden top-knot, was quite human, and so were her slender, leaf-shaped hands; but there was a fantastic, light-boned grace in her movements such as no human being ever had. Her voice was low, with a 'cello's fullness of tone. Everything about her, Kerr thought, was rare and delightful and curious. But there was a shadow in her face, as if a natural gaiety had been repressed by the overwhelming harshness of circumstance.

"Where shall I have the ashes sent?" Kerr asked as he took the form.

She plucked indecisively at her pink lower lip. "I am not sure. The manager where we are staying has told us we must leave tonight, and I do not know where we will go. Could I come to the bureau again when the ashes are ready?"

It was against regulations, but Kerr nodded. He would keep the capsule of ashes in his locker until she came. It would be nice to see her again.

She came, weeks later, for the ashes. There had been several battles of the bird people in the interval, and the pool in the tepidarium was full. As Kerr looked at her, he wondered how long it would be before she too was dead.

He asked her new address. It was a fantastic distance away, in the worst part of the city, and after a little hesitation he told her that if she could wait until his shift was over he would be glad to walk back with her.

She looked at him doubtfully. "It is most kind of you, but — but an earthman was kind to us once. The children used to throw stones at him."

Kerr had never thought much about the position of the non-human races in his world. If it was unjust, if they were badly treated, he had thought it no more than a particular instance of the general cruelty and stupidity. Now anger flared up in him.

"That's all right," he said harshly. "If you don't mind waiting, that is."

Rhysha smiled faintly. "No, I don't mind," she said.

Since there were still some hours to go on his shift, he took her into a small reception room where there was a chaise longue. "Try to sleep," he said.

A little before three he came to rouse her, and found her lying quiet but awake. They left the bureau by a side door.

The city was as quiet at this hour as it ever was. All the sign projectors, and most of the street lights, had been turned off to save power, and even the vast, disembodied voices that boomed out of the air all day long and half the night were almost silent. The darkness and quiescence of the city made it seem easy for them to talk as they went through the streets.

Kerr realized afterwards how confident he must have been of Rhysha's

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sympathy to have spoken to her as freely as he did. And she must have felt an equal confidence in him, for after a little while she was telling him fragments of her history and her people's past without reserve.

"After the earthmen took our planet," she said, "we had nothing left they wanted. But we had to have food. Then we discovered that they liked to watch us fight."

"You fought before the earthmen came?" Kerr asked.

"Yes. But not as we fight now. It was a ritual then, very formal, with much politeness and courtesy. We did not fight to get things from each other, but to find out who was brave and could give us leadership. The earth people were impatient with our ritual — they wanted to see us hurting and being hurt. So we learned to fight as we fight now, hoping to be killed.

"There was a time, when we first left our planet and went to the other worlds where people liked to watch us, when there were many of us. But there have been many battles since then. Now there are only a few left."

At the cross street a beggar slouched up to them. Kerr gave him a coin. The man was turning away with thanks when he caught sight of Rhysha's golden top-knot. "God-damned Extey!" he said in sudden rage. "Filth! And you, a man, going around with it! Here!" He threw the coin at Kerr.

"Even the beggars!" Rhysha said. "Why is it, Kerr, you hate us so?"

"Because we have wronged you," he answered, and knew it was the truth. "Are we always so unkind, though?"

"As the beggar was? Often . . . it is worse."

"Rhysha, you've got to get away from here."

"Where?" she answered simply. "Our people have discussed it so many times! There is no planet on which there are not already billions of people from earth. You increase so fast!

"And besides, it doesn't matter. You don't need us, there isn't any place for us. We cared about that once, but not any more. We're so tired — all of us, even the young ones like me — we're so tired of trying to live."

"You mustn't talk like that," Kerr said harshly. "I won't let you talk like that. You've got to go on. If we don't need you now, Rhysha, we will."

From the block ahead of them there came the wan glow of a municipal telescreen. Late as the hour was, it was surrounded by a dense knot of spectators. Their eyes were fixed greedily on the combat that whirled dizzily over the screen.

Rhysha tugged gently at Kerr's sleeve. "We had better go around," she said in a whisper. Kerr realized with a pang that there would be trouble if the viewers saw a "man" and an Extey together. Obediently he turned.

They had gone a block further when Kerr (for he had been thinking) said, "My people took the wrong road, Rhysha, about two hundred years ago.

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That was when the council refused to accept, even in principle, any form of population control. By now we're stifling under the pressure of our own numbers, we're crushed shapeless under it. Everything has had to give way to our one basic problem, how to feed an ever-increasing number of hungry mouths. Morality has dwindled into feeding ourselves. And we have the battle sports over the telecast to keep us occupied.

"But I think — I believe — that we'll get into the right road again sometime. I've read books of history, Rhysha. This isn't the first time we've chosen the wrong road. Someday there'll be room for your people, Rhysha, if only —" he hesitated — "if only because you're so beautiful."

He looked at her earnestly. Her face was remote and bleak. An idea came to him. "Have you ever heard anyone sing, Rhysha?"

"Sing? No, I don't know the word."

"Listen, then." He fumbled over his repertory and decided, though the music was not really suited to his voice, on Tamino's song to Pamina's portrait. He sang it for her as they walked along, as loudly as he dared.

Little by little Rhysha's face relaxed. "I liked that," she said when the song was over. "Sing more, Kerr."

"Do you see what I was trying to tell you?" he said at last, after many songs. "If we could make songs like that, Rhysha, isn't there hope for us?"

"For you, perhaps. Not us," Rhysha answered. There was anger in her voice. "Stop it, Kerr. I do not want to be waked."

But when they parted she clasped hands with him and told him where they could meet again. "You are really our friend," she said without coquetry.

When he next met Rhysha, Kerr said, "I brought you a present. Here." He handed her a parcel. "And I've some news, too."

Rhysha opened the little package. An exclamation of pleasure broke from her lips. "Oh, lovely! What a lovely thing! Where did you get it, Kerr?"

"In a shop that sells old things, in the back." He did not tell her he had given ten days' pay for the little turquoise locket. "But the stones are lighter than I realized. I wanted something that would be the color of your plumage."

Rhysha shook her head. "No, this is the color it should be. This is right." She clasped the locket around her neck and looked down at it with pleasure. "And now, what is the news you have for me?"

"A friend of mine is a clerk in the city of records. He tells me a new planet, near gamma Cassiopeiae, is being opened for colonization.

"I've filed the papers, and everything is in order. The hearing will be held on Friday. I'm going to appear in behalf of the Ngayir, your people, and ask that they be allotted space on the new world."

Rhysha turned white. He started toward her, but she waved him away. One

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hand was still clasping her locket, that was nearly the color of her plumage.

"It hurts so," she said, "it hurts so — to hope."

The hearing was held in a small auditorium in the basement of the Colonization building. Representatives of a dozen groups spoke before Kerr's turn came.

"Appearing on behalf of the Ngayir," the arbitrator read from a form in his hand, "S 3687 Kerr. And who are the Ngayir, S-Kerr? Some Indian group?"

"No, sir," Kerr said. "They are commonly known as the bird people."

"Oh, a conservationist!" The arbitrator looked at Kerr not unkindly. "I'm sorry, but your petition is quite out of order. It should never have been filed. Immigration is restricted by executive order to terrestrials. . . ."

Kerr dreaded telling Rhysha of his failure, but she took it with perfect calm.

"After you left I realized it was impossible," she said.

"Rhysha, I want you to promise me something. I can't tell you how sure I am that humanity is going to need your people sometime. It's true, Rhysha. I'm going to keep trying. I'm not going to give up.

"Promise me this, Rhysha: promise me that neither you nor the members of your group will take part in the battles until you hear from me again."

Rhysha smiled. "All right, Kerr."

Preserving the bodies of people who have died from a variety of diseases is not without its dangers. Kerr did not go to work that night or the next or for many nights. His dormitory chief, after listening to him shout in delirium for some hours, called a doctor, who filled out a hospital requisition slip.

He was gravely ill, and his recovery was slow. It was nearly five weeks before he was released.

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He wanted above all things to find Rhysha. He went to the place where she had been living and found that she had gone, no one knew where. In the end, he went to the identification bureau and begged for his old job there. Rhysha would, he was sure, think of coming to the bureau to get in touch with him.

He was still shaky and weak when he reported for work the next night. He went into the tepidarium about nine o'clock, during a routine inspection. And there Rhysha was.

He did not know her for an instant. The lovely turquoise of her plumage had faded to a dirty drab. But the little locket he had given her was still around her neck.

He got the big jointed tongs they used for moving bodies out of the pool, and put them in position. He lifted her out very gently and put her down on the edge of the pool. He opened the locket. There was a note inside.

"Dear Kerr," he read in Rhysha's clear, handsome script, "you must forgive me for breaking my promise to you. They would not let me see you when you were sick, and we were all so hungry. Besides, you were wrong to think your people would ever need us. There is no place for us in your world.

"I wish I could have heard you sing again. I liked to hear you sing. Rhysha."

Kerr looked from the note to Rhysha's face, and back at the note. It hurt too much. He did not want to realize that she was dead.

Outside, one of the vast voices that boomed portentously down from the sky half the night long began to speak: "Don't miss the newest, fastest battle sport. View the Durga battles, the bloodiest combats ever televised. Funnier than the bird people's battles, more thrilling than an Anda war, you'll . . ."

Kerr gave a cry. He ran to the window and closed it. He could still hear the voice. But it was all that he could do.

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My title for Idris Seabright's story in the April issue is:

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Some issues back we brought you the first of the fabulous scientific and para-scientific adventures of Professor Cleanth Penn Ransom, in which, as you'll recall, he invented a poetry machine so sensitive that it committed suicide when harshly criticized. Now that we have, through the kindness of H. Nearing, Jr. (like Ransom an academician, and like his creation a poet), learned more of the Professor's achievements, we realize that the first episode was relatively rational . . . almost realistic. By gradual steps we plan to lead you further into the wilds of Ransomania. Here the enterprising Ransom, accompanied as always by his Watson-and-Mentor Professor Archibald MacTate, attempts the application of voodoo methods in mathematical pedagogy with curious but logical results.

The Mathematical Voodoo

by H. NEARING, JR.

"WHO WAS IT whose slave Socrates extracted the Pythagorean theorem from?" said Professor Cleanth Penn Ransom, of the Mathematics Faculty. "From the mind of, I mean."

"Meno," said Professor Archibald MacTate, of Philosophy.

Ransom's eyes brightened. "That's the name of Plato's dialogue. The one that tells all about it."

"Yes."

"Well, it's a lot of nonsense." Ransom stuck out his little belly and began to swing in his swivel chair.

MacTate smiled. "See here, old boy, you're speaking of the man I teach." He tapped Ransom's desk with his finger. "Do I go about carping at Gauss and Newton — ?"

"That's exactly the point." Ransom stopped swinging and aimed a forefinger at his colleague. "You can teach your pupils right. Tell them that wasn't just any old slave Socrates was working on. You can quote me." He jabbed his belly with a thumb.

"Rather an obvious conclusion," said MacTate. "What's the trouble? Has someone flunked algebra?"

Ransom waved disdainfully. "Somebody's always flunking algebra. That's nothing. This man has flunked it six times. Twice in summer school."

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"You mean to tell me you could find no substitute for a barbarous requirement like —"

"It wasn't us." Ransom shook his head impatiently. "Some dim-witted dean kept coming across an obsolete catalogue listing that no one ever bothered to take out."

"But the boy —"

"The boy." Ransom groaned. "MacTate, I want you to meet the boy. He's coming here this afternoon. You're a philosopher. Maybe you can figure him out."

"He's in your algebra class now, I take it."

Ransom nodded. "And he's a senior, and it's too late for him to drop a course without getting a failure in it, and he sits —"

"Football player?"

"No, that's the funny thing about it." Ransom looked puzzled. "He's naturally dumb."

There was a decorous knock at the door.

"That's him now. He, I —" Ransom swung his chair around, straightened his tie, laid one hand gracefully on the desk and grasped his lapel with the other. Putting on a grave but benign expression, he intoned, "Come in," with a rising accent.

The young man that stepped into the office wore brown slacks, a blue coat, and a yellow tie. He was slight and narrow-shouldered, but his head and hands were abnormally large. About his eyes was a hunted expression.

"Appointment, doc." His voice was an uncertain baritone.

"Ah, yes. Sit down, Finchell." Ransom waved at a chair. "This is Professor MacTate, of the Philosophy Department."

The young man shook hands with MacTate and sat down.

"Now, Finchell," said Ransom, "what seems to be the — ah — core of your difficulties? With algebra, I mean." He looked at the boy piercingly.

Finchell rubbed his nose. The hunted look about his eyes grew sharper. "Well, I don't know, doc. I'm just a little slow, I guess." Suddenly an idea blossomed in his eyes. "My father and grandfather were actuaries. Do you think the vein could be worked out? You know, like a mine?"

Ransom looked at him. The hunted look returned to the boy's eyes. He smiled half-heartedly. "No good?"

Ransom reached into his desk drawer and took out a brown book. He flipped the pages. "This, Finchell, is a grade-school mathematics book. On page — twelve" — he turned a page and pressed it down — "we have a problem that most morons should be able to solve. Here. 'If Farmer Brown's horse eats one barrel of oats every two days, what part of the barrel constitutes his daily fare?' In other words, Finchell, — that's a little difficult in the phrasing so I'll ex-

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plain it to you — if this horse eats *one* barrel of oats every *two* days, how much oats does he eat in *one* day?" Ransom noted with joy that the boy's eyes were lit with a dawn of comprehension. "In terms of barrels, I mean," he added. The light in Finchell's eyes died.

"Finchell!" Ransom glared at the boy for a moment, then regained control of himself. He modulated his voice to bell-like tones. "See here." He took a sheet of paper from the desk drawer, drew the outline of a barrel on it, and bisected the outline horizontally. "The horse eats so much of the barrel every two days." He waved his pencil vaguely over the whole outline. "It takes him *two* days to eat so much. See? Now then, in *one* day, he would eat" — he pointed the pencil at the upper half of the outline — "this much. All you have to do is divide one barrel by two days. Right? Now put that down on the paper here. One divided by two." He handed the pencil to the boy.

Finchell looked at the paper as if he had been ordered to jump off a skyscraper. The hunted look about his eyes became poignant.

Ransom smiled at him ingratiatingly. "*One* divided by *two*. You can do it. Go on, write down *one* —."

The boy drew in a sobbing breath and traced a thin vertical line on the paper.

"*That's* it. You've practically got it. Now divide it by two."

Finchell stared at the paper.

"Go ahead. Don't you see? You've practically got it there. How many times does two go into one?"

Finchell dropped the pencil and looked at his mentor with tormented eyes. "It *can't* go in, doc," he said. "It's too damn big."

MacTate hastily pulled out his handkerchief and coughed into it uncontrollably. Ransom stared at his protegé incredulously. Then he dropped the book back into the desk drawer. The boy squirmed in his chair.

MacTate finally controlled his cough and wiped his eyes. "Tell me." He looked at Finchell. "How are you with the multiplication tables?"

Finchell brightened. "Oh, I can do those."

"You can?" Ransom's tone could not quite disguise his skepticism. "Let's see. How much is two — No. Let's make it hard. How much is nine times three?"

The boy fixed his eyes on the ceiling and twisted his jaw off center. For a minute or two he seemed to be chewing an imaginary taffy. Then he spoke. "Twenty-six. No. Twenty-seven."

"My God, that's right." Ransom looked at the boy with wonder in his eyes. "How'd you do that? In your head?"

Finchell dropped his eyes deprecatorily. "Well, yes. Sort of. I did it on my teeth."

"Oh, on your teeth."

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"Yes. You see, I figured that one times nine is nine. Everybody knows *that*. So then I put my tongue on this wisdom tooth —" He put a finger into his mouth and pointed. "That's ten. Now I know I have eight teeth on each side of my lower jaw. So the tooth to stop counting with when you're multiplying nine is this one." He pointed. "One past the half of your jaw. You count up to there twice, beginning with ten, and you have three times nine." Finchell smiled with an air of having overcome difficulties reasonably. "It's less noticeable than using your fingers. They don't laugh at you so much."

"Well Ransom, you can't say there's absolutely nothing to work with there." MacTate turned to his colleague. "He can multiply, and that's a start."

"Yes." Ransom glowered at the boy.

MacTate rubbed his chin. "Perhaps if there were some way of giving him confidence — You know. A simple formula of some sort that he could memorize and apply to various sorts of problems."

Ransom studied his protegé and shook his head judiciously. "A rabbit's foot would work better."

MacTate smiled. "You mean something on the order of a football player's talisman?"

"I've seen it work." Ransom looked at Finchell.

Following his colleague's glance, MacTate noticed that Finchell's eyes were shining with a strange eagerness. He hastened to dispel the boy's unseemly interest in this turn of the conversation. "Now, Ransom. Next you'll be tutoring a wax doll containing his fingernail clippings. Voodoo, or whatever it is."

Ransom turned to him with an expression that matched Finchell's. "What did you say?"

"I merely said that it's absurd to suppose that contagious magic —"

"Wait." Ransom aimed a finger at him. "What's so absurd about it? I've read in — lots of places that that voodoo stuff does funny things sometimes. Who knows?" He looked at Finchell. "Who knows what might be best for this man?" He put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Anything we can do for him is well warranted." He swung back to the desk. "Short of murder," he added under his breath.

"But Ransom. Don't you think — ?"

Ransom gave his colleague a warning glance. "I think it's an idea worth trying." He reached into the desk drawer and took out a fingernail clipper. "Here, Finchell. Let's have some of your fingernails."

Finchell pressed his fists against his stomach and shrank back into his chair.

"What's wrong, man?" said Ransom. "This might work for you."

"I —" Finchell gasped. "I don't have any fingernails, doc. I bit them all off trying to do algebra."

Ransom laughed with strained sympathy. "Is that all? Well, your hair will

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do just as well." He whipped out a pocket knife, opened it, and sliced off several strands of the boy's hair. "Now. MacTate and I will make this wax doll this afternoon. And tonight" — Ransom clapped the boy smartly on the shoulder — "tonight I wouldn't be surprised if you found mathematical concepts suddenly — generating in your mind." He laughed, rather too heartily. "Tomorrow in class we'll see what's happened."

Finchell got up, clasped Ransom's hand fervently in both of his hands, and looked earnestly into the little man's eyes. "Thanks, doc. Thanks —" He turned and left the room.

When the door had closed behind Finchell, MacTate looked at his colleague. "My dear Ransom —"

"Now, it isn't going to hurt to try this, MacTate. The boy is one of those low mental types that can be helped by superstitions. If we can teach him any mathematics at all, by any means at all —"

"But if he tells anyone, you'll be the laughing stock —"

"*He* won't tell anybody." Ransom waved a deprecatory hand in the direction of the door. "Didn't you hear him say how he counted on his teeth instead of his fingers so people wouldn't laugh at him? He's scared to death people will find out he's dumb."

"But he told you about the teeth-counting."

"All right. That's different. He was confessing to a — diagnostician. But this voodoo —" Ransom made a face.

"Well, I hope you're right. By the way —" MacTate looked at his little colleague curiously. "Do you really intend to make a wax doll?"

Ransom looked up with a sneer that slowly faded into an expression of suspicion. "Is there any good reason? Why I should, I mean?"

MacTate looked thoughtful. "Disregarding the ethical consideration, it occurred to me that if you have sized up the boy correctly, he is just the sort to insist on seeing the doll. Better have a few of his hairs sticking out of it, too. If this scheme is to succeed at all, it has to be quite circumstantial."

Ransom sighed. "All right. I'll make a doll." He slapped the desk with his hand. "But I'm *not* going to teach it algebra."

MacTate did not argue the point, but later he wondered if he should not have argued it. From time to time as he lectured to his classes the next day, he would catch his thoughts wandering to Finchell and the wax doll. The day after, he was in Ransom's office again.

"Well, Ransom, how's your boy coming along? What's his name? Finchell."

Ransom glared at him.

"No change, I take it." MacTate glanced over the desk. "Do you have the doll here?"

Ransom opened his bottom desk drawer, took out the doll, and set it on his

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desk. About six inches tall, its body had been painted brown and blue, with a yellow streak to represent a tie. From the top of its head rose a quincunx of hairs embedded in the wax. Its features were vague but somehow sinister.

"You were right about one thing." Ransom turned the doll around to look at its face. "Finchell showed up here the next morning and asked to see this thing. Even wanted to know how I went about teaching it." He smiled reminiscently.

"What did you tell him?"

"Oh, I gave him some kind of double talk. Something about going through the book with it step by step. I don't remember —"

"Did he believe you?" MacTate turned the doll around again.

"What?" Ransom stared at him.

"Was he convinced that you really had tutored the doll?" MacTate waved his hand. "Or do you think he saw through you?"

"Of course he did. Believe me, I mean." Ransom looked confused. "I think he did. How can you tell what a boy like that is thinking? If he thinks at all. He didn't press the point, anyway."

"I see." MacTate brushed his finger over the hairs on the doll's head.

Ransom's eyes narrowed. "Look, MacTate. What are you getting at? Why shouldn't the boy believe me? I made the doll and showed it to him, didn't I? Isn't that — ?"

"Ransom, old boy." MacTate put his hands on the desk and leaned forward. "As an old friend I may observe without offense that you are one of the world's worst liars. And as I said before, a trick of this sort has to be as circumstantial as possible. Now, the boy's mathematical ineptitude does not necessarily preclude penetration with respect to human reactions. Maybe he can't learn your algebra, but he probably can size *you* up better than you think. If you want my advice, I think you should go through a book with this doll — step by step, as you said — so that you can assure the boy unequivocally —"

"Wait." Ransom looked outraged. "You want *me* to teach algebra to this — this —" He gestured toward the doll. "My God, MacTate. Everybody'll think I'm crazy."

"You pointed out yourself that the boy probably won't mention the arrangement to anyone."

"But, MacTate. Can you picture me, now —"

MacTate shrugged. "Suit yourself, old man. I'm only telling you what I think."

Ransom leaned his elbows on the desk and put his jaw between his hands, looking ruefully into the distance. "All right. I said I would try this fool thing, and I will. Go away, though, MacTate. I won't do it in front of anybody."

Next morning, the ringing of his office phone roused MacTate from a nap

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induced by the *Journal of Aesthetics*, open on his desk. Ransom's voice, on the other end, was strained and excited.

"MacTate. He worked a problem. This morning."

"Problem? He?" MacTate was not yet fully awake. "Who?"

"Finchell. Who else? He worked a problem in class all by himself. I'm not exaggerating."

"Oh, Finchell. Yes. He worked a problem? What kind of problem was it?"

"An *al*-gebra problem. What's the matter with you, MacTate? You asleep or something?"

"No, no. I meant was it a multiplication problem, as before, or something more difficult. You say it was an algebra problem? Nothing terribly hard, I trust."

"No, nothing terribly hard," Ransom trilled ironically. "Just a little thing involving the binomial theorem, that's all."

"Ransom. You're pulling my leg."

"Look. MacTate. Oh my honor as a — Look. I swear by everything I —"

"The binomial theorem." MacTate tasted the thought. "You're really serious about this?"

"On my honor as a —"

"And it was entirely correct? No indication that someone had done it for him to memorize — ?"

"Absolutely not. I made him do it three times with different signs and once with different exponents. He's got it down. The binomial theorem, I mean."

"Just a moment, Ransom. Did you teach the doll anything yesterday?"

"What if I did?"

"What was it you taught it? Think."

"Why —" Ransom's voice dropped almost to a whisper. "I guess it was the binomial theorem."

A fortnight later Ransom informed his colleague that Finchell, having mastered algebra and analytic geometry and bitten deep into calculus, had transferred to a mathematics major. "We're going to let him satisfy requirements by taking special examinations," said Ransom. "By the end of the year he'll know more mathematics than a lot of members of this department, anyway." He laughed. "What a boy. I still feel like a fool teaching this thing" — he patted the doll on the head — "but it's a — unique experience, covering a book a week and knowing that somebody's learning everything you teach. I almost know how it feels to be a coach."

"Well, you're tutoring a team, so to speak." MacTate smiled.

"And how they click. Maybe we should teach everybody that way."

MacTate shook his head judiciously. "No. Won't do. There are too many geniuses on this campus already."

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"But really." Ransom set the doll on the edge of his desk. "Finchell is a real genius. Or this doll is, I don't know which. Next week I'm going to start them on complex variables." He tripped the doll with his hand and watched it flip over into the wastebasket. "I wonder how long it would take them to learn all the math I can teach." He reached into the wastebasket and set the doll on the edge of his desk again.

MacTate looked at him thoughtfully. "It's possible that mathematical *gestalten* are already forming in Finchell's mind that have never happened to shape up in yours. It's a matter of juxtaposition and attention and general experience, isn't it?"

"But what about Socrates and the man's slave? You remember. In Plato. How you're born with math in your head, and don't have to learn it but only be reminded of it." Ransom tripped the doll again and sent it spinning into the wastebasket. Its head struck the edge of the metal container with a loud clang.

"Aren't you afraid you'll break that thing, Ransom, playing with it that way? I wonder what would happen if you did."

"It won't break," said Ransom. "Special grade wax. I do this all the time."

"Well, as for Meno's slave" — MacTate's eyes twinkled — "you yourself have assured me that the notion of innate mathematical concepts is untenable. 'A lot of nonsense,' if I remember correctly." He looked at his watch and rose. "So that takes care of that. I have a class in five minutes." He went to the door and then turned around. "Don't forget to take your doll out of the wastebasket. Heaven forfend we should nip a genius in the bud by losing his psychic control."

From time to time during the ensuing months MacTate heard from his rapturous colleague concerning Finchell's new triumphs. Then one day he was summoned by phone to Ransom's office to hear something "terribly important." When he got there, he found the little man smiling with something like transport at a sleek young man in a well-fitting gray suit who sat before his desk. MacTate stared at the young man trying to place him.

"MacTate, you remember Finchell." Ransom beamed.

As the young man rose to shake hands with him, MacTate almost rubbed his eyes. Gone was the self-consciousness, gone the hunted expression about the eyes, gone the rabbity awkwardness of the mathematical idiot whom he had seen here only a few months before. The person shaking his hand was mature and nearly handsome, radiating intelligence and competence. His handclasp was almost numbing.

"I have not forgotten that my career began with a suggestion of yours, sir. I am happy to see you again." Gone, too, was the uncertain voice. Finchell spoke in an enormous bass.

"Look," said Ransom as the others sat down, "I want some of the credit

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here, too. I was right that time about Socrates and the slave, MacTate. It's a matter of ability and experience. Mathematical aptitude, I mean. How did you put it? Juxtaposition and attention."

"You mean Finchell knows something you haven't taught him?" MacTate looked at the young man with interest.

Ransom pretended to wince at the understatement. "MacTate, Finchell knows something no other mathematician yet born has discovered. He's solved the Problem of Dirichlet."

"He has? What on earth is that?"

"Dirichlet was Gauss's successor at Goettingen. Among other things, he tried to prove that a region bounded by a single curve, like a slice of the earth's surface, for example, can be projected isogonally and point for point on a circle. In the case of the earth it amounts to reproducing a convex surface on a plane, like a map. Well, to prove it, he tackled an analogous problem in the calculus of variations. The calculus problem was to find a function, u, which with its first derivatives is continuous in the region to be projected, which has continuous second derivatives, and which makes a minimum of the integral — I won't go into details. Anyway, for a while they assumed that a function of this sort really exists, and they called that method of solving the problem Dirichlet's Principle. Then a fellow named Weierstrass showed that the reasoning was insufficient. Now Finchell" — *Ransom looked at the young man with almost* maternal pride — "Finchell has proved definitively the existence of the function u."

MacTate looked at Finchell and nodded benignly. "Quite something, I imagine."

"The department went over and over it," continued Ransom, "and then sent it every place for checking — Chicago, Princeton, London, every place — and nobody could find anything wrong with it." He beamed at the young man again. "Finchell already has an international reputation."

Finchell laughed, richly and somewhat pompously, and stood up. "Now, Professor, you're likely to make an egotistical ass of me. I'd better get back to my researches before you do so." He seized MacTate's hand, and smiled heartily. "A great pleasure to see you again, sir." He turned briskly and left the room.

MacTate looked after him reflectively. "And just a few months ago —"

"My God, do you remember that?" Ransom screwed up his face. "To think how I was hoping something horrible would happen to him. And now he's the pride of the University. Next week he's going to read a paper on the function u in the public lecture series. Only student they ever let do that. And some of the biggest wigs in this part of the country are coming to hear it."

"Well." MacTate looked thoughtful. "I'm glad to hear of the happy event.

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I suppose Finchell's career must lie in mathematics now. I just wonder what he's going to do when you stop teaching that doll. Have you tried to wean him yet?"

"No." Ransom took the voodoo doll out of his drawer, looked at it, and set it on the edge of his desk. "But he won't need it much longer. He's working on a critique of Einstein's unified field theory — you know, about gravitation and electromagnetism being the same thing. Going to read a paper on it at the convention next summer. So I've got to take him through complex tensors. And then we can pull this hair out and —" he flipped the doll into the wastebasket — "throw this away."

"Have you mentioned that to him?"

"No. Why should I? He's doing all right just the way things are."

"You don't think he might resent your proposal?"

Ransom took the doll out of the wastebasket. "I don't see why he ever has to know about it. He hasn't asked about the doll for a long time now. Probably forgotten about it. As a matter of fact" — his eyes twinkled — "Finchell seems to be interested in a different kind of a doll lately. Girl that sings downtown. Name of — Dolores something. Anyway, he's worked up such an interest in music that I'm almost jealous." He grinned.

MacTate waved at the doll. "I wonder if that's jealous, too."

"MacTate. Will you stop worrying about the doll. Anybody would think you took this voodoo thing seriously. I have to keep fooling with it so he won't think I'm lying to him, but that's no reason to carry on as if there were something — valid in it. I give him the same assignments I teach the doll, and he works them out for himself, that's all." Ransom set the doll on the edge of the desk. "Someday when he's a doddering old professor he might remember and say, 'Ransom, my old friend and benefactor, what ever happened to that silly wax voodoo you made of me?' And I'll clap him on the shoulder and say, 'Finchell, you were dreaming: There never was any such thing. All you needed was a little confidence, and —' " he flipped the doll into the wastebasket — "'I gave it to you.' So stop worrying."

MacTate wished that Ransom's blandness were contagious. He could not overcome a sense of foreboding, a feeling that the whole thing had been wrong to begin with and was now out of hand. But he consoled himself with the reflection that it was not really his affair, and for the next week he avoided his little colleague's office so that he would not have to think about the matter.

But then one morning his office phone woke him from a *Journal of Aesthetics* doze again, and Ransom was wildly insisting that he come over at once.

"What is it this time?" MacTate said sleepily. "Has Finchell discovered the thirteenth dimension?"

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"MacTate. Weren't you at the lecture last night? I know I told you —"

"What lecture? You mean Finchell's? On the function — what was it? No, I'm afraid I wasn't there. I —"

"Well, neither was Finchell."

"What?"

Ransom had hung up. MacTate lost no time in getting over to his office. The little man was pacing restlessly up and down.

"MacTate, why should he do this to me? Why? I make a great mathematician of him, have his problem checked for him, put him in the lecture series and invite the big wigs to hear him. And then he disappears. Without a word."

"What did you do? Cancel the lecture?"

"Couldn't. Everybody was already there. We had to let the Dean talk about methods of teaching rapid calculation. It was — dismal." Ransom sat down and held his head in his hands. "Mathematically speaking, the University is in the dog house."

MacTate looked thoughtful. "When did you last see Finchell?"

"Let's see. This is Tuesday." Ransom paused a moment. "Yesterday I figured he was resting up for the lecture, so I didn't look for him. The weekend doesn't count. Thursday and Friday I was out of town. I guess it's been almost a week."

"Old man." MacTate put a hand on his colleague's shoulder. "Have you inquired at the jails? Or the — hospitals?"

Ransom gasped. He looked past MacTate with glazed eyes. His lips formed the word "morgue." He grabbed his hat and darted to the door. "Let's get down there."

After a week or so of frenzied inquiry, between and after classes, at the morgue, the bureau of missing persons, the police department, the public health service, and five or six insurance companies, Ransom was beginning to suspect that Finchell had been shanghaied for service on a ship engaged in illicit trade, while MacTate favored the theory that the doll had contracted contagious amnesia from striking its head on the rim of the wastebasket.

"You know," he said one day as they sat in Ransom's office, wearied by the usual rounds, "I wonder if there *could* be any connection between the doll and Finchell's disappearance. If he sensed that it wasn't cared for properly —"

"Who doesn't care for it properly?"

"When you flip it into the wastebasket, you know, it sometimes strikes its head against the edge. Have you ever noticed whether it's chipped or —?"

"Of course it's not chipped." Ransom looked offended. "I should know, shouldn't I, working with it all the time?"

"When was the last time you did work with it?"

"Why, it was — What does that matter? Look, I'll show you." Ransom opened the bottom desk drawer and reached into it. "You can see for yourself

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that it's just the same —" He opened the drawer wider, bent over it, and rummaged about in it. "Funny. I'm sure — Maybe I put it in this one." He opened the drawer above and rummaged in it. Then the drawer above that, and finally the central drawer at the top of the desk. He looked at MacTate in bewilderment. "What happened to it?"

"How about the wastebasket?"

They both leaned over the wastebasket, nearly bumping heads. Ransom reached in and threw out several balls of paper and a candy wrapper. There was no doll.

"Well," said MacTate, "there may be more to this than —"

"MacTate. Listen. What could have happened to that doll? We've got to find it. We've got to find the person that stole it." Ransom's eyes were anguished. "But who would want to steal it?" He wrung his hands.

There was a knock at the door.

"Now who — ?"

The door opened slightly and a head appeared around it.

"Professor Ransom?" The visitor came into the room. He wore blue slacks and a maroon jacket, and his silk shirt was open at the neck. In spite of the waving hair and newly grown mustache, Ransom recognized his erstwhile protegé.

Finchell moved languorously to a chair, dropped into it, and smiled fatuously at Ransom. "I'm leaving the University, Professor, and remembering that you were my adviser, I felt that I ought to let you know." He spoke with a peculiarly meticulous articulation and resonant, pear-shaped tones.

"Well now, that's damned decent of you, Finchell." Ransom was unable to sustain his sarcasm. "Where have you been, you Judas?" he burst out. "Why did you disgrace me at the lecture? Why did you keep me running to the morgue and the — ?" As if suddenly realizing the futility of his rage, he stopped and looked at Finchell appealingly. "Finchell — why?" he whispered.

Finchell looked mildly astonished at Ransom's outburst. "Lecture? At the morgue, you say?" He squeezed his eyes shut and drew a hand gracefully across them. "Yes. I remember. There was something about a lecture. But not at the morgue, was it? Well," — he opened his eyes — "I trust I missed nothing indispensable."

Ransom was speechless. MacTate took over. "You say you're leaving the University?"

"Yes." Finchell put on a supercilious expression. "Not that I disapprove of the sort of work you people do here. It has its place. But as Dolores says, when one's art is at stake —" He smiled tolerantly. "I'm to have my final audition tomorrow, and waiting for a degree from the University would delay my career for some months. Not that I disapprove of degrees, as I said, but —" He ges-

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tured gracefully with his hand. "You see how it is." He stood up. "Nice knowing you, Professor," he said to Ransom. "I'll try to remember to send you tickets sometime." He turned to the door.

"Finchell." MacTate called after him. "One last thing before you go. Does the function *u* mean anything to you?"

Finchell turned around. "The function *u*?" He squeezed his eyes shut and touched them gracefully with his hand. "Afraid not." He opened his eyes. "Sounds like one of those frightful mathematical things. I never could do math." He turned again and swung from the room.

MacTate sighed. "Well, I hate to say I told you so, but I knew you should have been more careful of that doll."

Ransom started. "The doll! MacTate, call him back. We forgot to ask him what he did with the doll."

"What makes you think he did anything with it?"

"But we're the only ones who knew. Who else but —"

"I'm not so sure." MacTate shook his head. "Anyway, my guess is that the person who empties your wastebasket is the one who can tell us most about the doll. Who do you suppose that would be?"

Ransom looked at him. "Do you think — ?" He stood up. "Let's find out."

From the Director of Maintenance, they went to the Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds, the Supplies Coordinator, the Foreman Janitor, and the Assistant in Charge of Washrooms and Waste — and finally found the emptier of Ransom's wastebasket filling soap containers in the School of Business Administration. He was a wiry man of indeterminate age.

"Doll?" he said in answer to their questions. He rubbed his nose reflectively with his forefinger. "Oh, the little doll. Painted with colors. Yes. I find him in wastebasket. Two, maybe three weeks ago sometime. I am taking him home for the baby, but he's lost." He shook his head sadly.

"How could you lose a thing like that?" Ransom was annoyed. "It was at least —"

"Just a moment, old man." MacTate stepped forward. "Tell me," he said to the janitor, "did you lose the doll at home?"

The janitor pondered, then shook his head. "No. When I get home, he's gone. I don't tell the baby. She's —"

"Where did you go after you left the University with the doll?"

The janitor turned his head, pursed his lips, and pressed a finger against them. Suddenly his eyes lit up. "Ah. Now I remember. I go to the opera, where it plays *Meistersinger* by Richard Wagner. In the second act I go. I am apprentice."

"You mean where all the apprentices come out and riot because what's his name is courting one of their fiancées by mistake?"

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The janitor smiled. "That." He nodded. "That is right."

"And did you have the doll with you when you went on the stage?"

"Yes. I have him in my pants pocket." He patted the seat of his overalls. "Wrap up in — I think brown paper. Under my — what? Costume."

"Then after you came off the stage, did you look to see if the doll was still there?"

The janitor shook his head and held a fist to one eye. "When I am come off the stage, I have the — what? Black eye. They forget it is only play. I don't think about nothing else till I am home. Then he's gone. The doll."

"But you think you must have lost it during the riot scene? On the stage."

"I go back after and look. Next day. I am smuggler in *Carmen* by Georges Bizet. I ask stage hands." The janitor shrugged. "They do not see. They think, I think too, some star pick him up. Stars very — what? Superstitious. They find something on stage, anywhere, they pick him up. Hide for good luck. Never tell nobody."

"Well, Ransom." MacTate turned to his colleague. "That's that. Your voodoo is probably sitting in some diva's dressing room, listening to arias and scales —" He stopped, suddenly struck by a thought. "Just a moment. Didn't you tell me Finchell has a friend who sings? What kind of singer is she? Do you know?"

Ransom frowned impatiently. "What's that got to do with —" His mouth fell open. He looked at MacTate, then jabbed a finger at him. "Opera."

"Wouldn't it be a coincidence — ?" MacTate shrugged.

Ransom groaned. "An opera singer. Oh, God. And to think he was ready to tackle Einstein. MacTate, we've got to get that doll back." His eyes blazed. "I'll get a search warrant —"

MacTate shook his head. "No use, old man. They'd only make a fool of you." He looked thoughtful. "Anyway, didn't Finchell leave notes of any sort on this electromagnetism thing? Illustrative figures or something like that."

Ransom nodded ruefully. "I've got his notes," he said, "and they look like the greatest thing since the Theory of Special Relativity. But nobody will ever know now."

"Why not?"

"Well, to save time in his figuring, Finchell invented two new symbols. Without bothering to put down what they mean. Crazy things. One he called a '*horse*.' "

MacTate looked at him, startled. "And the other — ?"

"A '*barrel*.' What I don't get —" Ransom frowned with perplexity — "is where he could have picked up crazy names like that."

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All debate as to which major power will extend its holdings by sending the first ship to the moon is herewith settled by David Grinnell's revelation that that first ship was sent over fifty years ago — and by an American. Why do our textbooks of history and science fail to record so epic an achievement? That's Mr. Grinnell's story . . .

Extending the Holdings

by DAVID GRINNELL

NOT ALL THINGS go as per schedule; in the space flight of Edward Rosinger nothing went right. The publicity, in the first place, went completely haywire.

Rosinger and his sister and his brother and his wife had all written several dozen letters in their neat calligraphy to the leading newspapers and journals. These had universally been consigned to the wastebaskets as the writings of a crank. Had Rosinger waited until summer, when the traditional journalistic silly season sets in, some of the letters might have seen print. But the journals were quite busy with the carryings-on at the court of Wilhelm I at Potsdam, and with the amazing murder of a man by his wife in the public thoroughfare by means of a deliberately misdriven hansom cab.

Rosinger did receive a polite note from the editor of *Littell's Living Age* requesting further details as to the results of the "experiment," but in his general fury, he did not deign to answer. His short black beard bristled and his eyes fairly sparked with blue flames when his sister dared to insinuate that perhaps the papers preferred results to talk. Rosinger could only pour out his scorn for the scoundrels who had omitted to mention Fulton's trip a half century before and had sabotaged every great discovery since. For them, pooh. He would publish nothing of his works until the thing was accomplished. And then he would astound the world and confound the papers by personally presenting a bit of genuine moon lava to President Cleveland.

The few neighbors to Rosinger's isolated farmhouse paid him little heed. They were accustomed to crazy doings at the house and Maine folk were never cursed with excessive curiosity over the goings-on of their neighbors. If there were unusual fireworks seen at the Rosinger farm outside of the Fourth of July, that was his privilege. And if, for a day or so, several hands had reported what seemed like a big ball of metal twine hanging about a hundred feet over Rosinger's big red barn with no apparent support, that was

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still no occasion for prying. Doubtless, it did not concern them in the least.

Of course, when the ball of "twine" — it was six feet across and not very substantial for it could be seen to be hollow with a curious bluish flickering within its periphery — suddenly fell with a roar and exploded right in the barn, the neighbors rallied with fire buckets. Rosinger was leaping up and down afterwards in veritable fits of fury, charging that stupid neighbors had deliberately flooded his chemical storehouse, too, with water and that it would set him back days in his plan. His sister and his brother's wife had all they could do to keep him from loading his shotgun and giving the nearest neighbor a blast or two. And while the two women clung to his arms, exhorting him to keep quiet, his brother was patiently clearing up the mess and setting about the drafting of plans for the moon globe.

The thing when they finally completed it also looked like a very loose ball of twine. The interlocked circles of white wire made a globe several yards in diameter, just large enough to enclose a solid box about eight feet in all dimensions: really a huge packing box, built of firm, closely set timbers, fastened with powerful bolts, well caulked and tarred and absolutely watertight. The box sported a glass bull's-eye window at every side, six in all, and was bolted tightly within the framework of the wire ball.

Within the box was a hammock, several cabinets containing such food as could be carried in an edible form like hardtack, chocolate, dried beef. Also tanks of water, also various instruments for observation and measurement, also certain mysterious gadgets and objects from which ran wires attached to the outside sphere. This last was Rosinger's own affair, certain galvanic discoveries of his own, motivating the whole shebang.

So when after the various series of setbacks the thing was finally completed and Rosinger announced his intention of taking off at once, that very evening, it was, quite frankly, a distinct relief to his sister and his brother's wife. His brother's wife, indeed, had begun openly to express her belief that Edward Rosinger was touched.

Rosinger's brother, a taciturn man three years younger than Edward, said nothing. Actually he had been doing a good deal of the manual work on the matter and seemed perhaps to be interested in the wild scheme's success.

That evening, along about ten at night, Edward Rosinger and his brother and the two women repaired to the rebuilt barn and behind it to where the flying contraption stood. The moon had just risen; it was nearly full and it was shining a baleful orange red on the horizon. Rosinger pulled out his very accurate turnip watch, glanced at it very carefully, made a rapid mental calculation, and said, "Four hours."

Gravely shaking hands with his brother and forgetting to bid good-bye to the two women, he opened the hinged side of the box, and stepping between

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the wires of the ball, climbed into the little chamber. He closed the side carefully and tightly. His brother stepped up and began to smear tarry stuff along the hinges and bolts, further enforcing the air-tightness.

Stepping back, the three people waited. Rosinger's brother consulted his watch, staring hard at its face. Then suddenly he snapped it shut, put it into his pocket, and looked up.

Almost at that moment there came a peculiar humming noise from the wires of the big ball. A faint blue aura showed around each strip of metal, which rapidly increased in volume as Edward Rosinger's strange galvanic currents took hold. There was a crackling of forces within the body of the network. The little wooden chamber, with its dark circles of glass eyes, seemed to glow in the bluish outlines. With a very gentle sigh, the whole mass seemed quietly to detach itself from the earth and to float very slowly and bubble-like away.

Now it was as high as the barn roof, and the three people on the ground craned their heads back to watch it. It seemed to gather speed a little, to jump slightly in the air. That would be Edward pushing its power to the second notch — there were twelve on his power board. Now the ball began to ascend into the air with growing rapidity. As they watched the dwindling ball of blue sparks, they saw that it was definitely assuming a Lunawards direction.

The blue spark disappeared in a few more minutes amidst the stars.

When they no longer could spot the thing, the three people gradually lowered their heads and heaved a unanimous sigh. With no further ado, and no need for words, they walked back to the farmhouse and to their beds.

Being frugal people, they had already prepared letters to the several scientific journals Edward Rosinger had taken, ordering the cancellation of his subscriptions and the refunding of whatever was left of the subscription money. Rosinger's brother also took out his notes for an advertisement to be placed in the Bangor papers, selling a number of carboys of chemicals and similar equipment to the highest bidders.

Finally, just before he damped the fire in the living-room chimney for the night, Rosinger's brother tossed in a copy of a London journal he had chanced upon in the mail several months back and had withheld prudently from his wasteful and impractical brother. There was a certain series of studies in the journal which proved rather conclusively that the space between the moon and the earth was quite devoid of any heat whatever — in fact, several times colder than the unattainable frigid poles of the earth itself. He knew quite well that there had been no heating apparatus in Edward Rosinger's cabin. And he saw no reason for the additional expenditure for an oil stove that would undoubtedly have been made by his brother had he seen the article in question.

After all, William Rosinger had plans of his own. And it took money to extend his new holdings.

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It is less odd than it may seem that we recently received a singularly fine specimen of the contemporary British tale of terror . . . from Laguna Beach, California! Southern California can boast an impressive colony of British writers, many of them specialists in stories of the unusual and fantastic: Heard, Huxley, Isherwood — and now a close friend of these colonists makes his professional writing debut in a story characterized by the quiet conviction and subtle terror which make his countrymen (even when expatriates) masters of the impact of understatement.

Miss Frost

by CHRISTOPHER WOOD

How is it possible to forget something that was of profound significance to one as a child, something that frightened one? I find it hard to understand; yet it is so. I used to look back on my childhood as having been uneventful and happy, especially from the age of seven which was when Miss Bird came to me. Dear Miss Bird! — the one person I adored, the perfect governess and companion. True, my memory of the time before that was hazy. I remembered my stepmother rushing in to the nursery one morning and saying dramatically: "My poor boy, you no longer have a father!" And my serenely continuing to suck marmalade off my fingers; for all that I can remember of my father even now is my mysterious ability to blow open the lid of his half hunter watch. Then I had a dim recollection of once being in a perambulator, and once in a cot; as though just for a moment I withdrew my attention from the mysteries within and peeped at the world about me. These were my earliest memories. Finally it always distressed me if by chance I recalled the fact that before Miss Bird I had had a governess named Frost who had only stayed for a month or so. But why she had stayed so short a time and why the thought of her still made me uneasy I had no idea.

Such was my happy ignorance of my childhood until one day about a week ago I rashly allowed myself to be overcome by nostalgia for the house in which I was born. It stood in a once well-to-do suburb of London — if it still existed. I had not thought of it for years, but driving along in my little car I was surprised how anxious I was to see it again. As I drew near and began to climb the familiar hill I was horrified to see that cheap little houses had sprung up

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everywhere. Why had I not made this pilgrimage years ago? The scene of those happy outings, I on my tricycle horse, Miss Bird trotting along beside me, was now desecrated. Possibly it was too late. . . . But no, there was the house, forlorn and dusty, in its last days before the flood of 'convenient suburban homes' swept over it. Unless somebody took mercy on it, for a 'to be sold' sign hung crookedly on the gate to the drive. I drove in and got out of the car. It was an ugly, mid-victorian house, I was surprised to see, but I didn't care. I found it charming. It was full of my memories and perhaps before it gave up the ghost it could whisper some forgotten secret in my ear.

First the garden. It had covered about seven acres and had included a paddock in which hay parties had been given. It was there that I had sat cravenly trembling on a pony. . . . I went round the side of the house expectantly. But the enemy had advanced on three sides and was only waiting to close in for the kill. All that remained was a half acre of seedy grass on which my cedar tree stood dying. The croquet lawn, the gravel paths, the rhododendrons were all gone. In their place were the back yards of the detestable little villas.

I had better not have come. But the house — at least I could pay my last respects to it. The doors to the conservatory were in no condition to resist me; a slight push allowed me to enter. I began to wander from room to room, and behind me my footsteps echoed dismally. Dismally, but not quite accurately — a shiver ran up my spine. Mustering my courage I turned and looked. A large black dog of no definable breed was following close on my heels. It stopped when I did and looked up at me questioningly. "Nice dog," I said, relieved, "where did you come from?" and I patted it. It gave a curious little whine and wagged its tail. "Come along," I said, glad of its company, and we proceeded metaphorically hand in hand.

It was sad, cold, and dead. Only in the dining room did I think I recognised on the walls traces of the rich, velvety Edwardian wall paper. I descended to the basement. The vast mysterious caverns I remembered — the big kitchen, the larders, and the corner where the rocking-horse, banished for some reason, had stood — had dwindled to a few grimy cellars to which practically no light penetrated. I retreated upstairs and paused in the hall before climbing to the upper floors. My memories could make no headway against the desolation of the empty house. I closed my eyes, trying to visualise it as it had been; but I could not reconstruct even one room. Only when, last of all, still followed by the dog, I entered what had been my nursery did the house condescend to notice me. It was as though in crossing the threshold I broke an invisible web spun by time across the doorway. For, with the yielding of some almost palpable resistance, the house came alive. Even the dog seemed pleased. It kept running round the room, nuzzling my hand before starting off again.

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I stood very quietly in the middle of the floor, hardly breathing. Outside I could see the tattered boughs of the cedar tree gold-green in the sunlight. I could almost believe that below the window the garden existed still in all its spaciousness. But the room, like all the others, was empty. Just as in the old days my eyes became fascinated by motes of dust dancing in a beam of sunlight. Dragons, airships, little people, they had been. . . . I half closed my eyes and, as it were, floated myself in the golden beam of light. I was one of the specks of dust, and I watched myself travel on a gentle draught of air down the beam to the corner of the room where something glittered in a crack of the floor. I stared at it, and a discord from the past echoed in my mind — an exceedingly loud, harsh noise caused by my childish fists striking the keys of the upright piano which had stood there against the wall. Something had once happened in that corner. I had become hysterical, angry, or frightened — someone else had been there. But who? I found myself trembling as I bent down and pried at the glittering object on the floor. It seemed quite natural, if not exactly helpful, that the dog in an excess of excitement should dig away with his paws beside me. To the accompaniment of a fusillade of barks I finally secured it. It was a tiny link from a gold chain, and its very smallness had, I suppose, allowed it to remain hidden all those years. For as I stood holding it in the hollow of my hand a tense feeling of anticipation told me I had seen it before. The stage was set, and in the wings of my memory someone was waiting, someone dressed in black. . . . I had to relax, to be still, to look effortlessly at the link. Suddenly, in precise detail, as vividly as if twenty seconds rather than twenty years had passed since last it had concerned me, a figure presented itself to my mind's eye. Miss Frost had returned to my memory, and with her every detail of what went on between us. It was, I can only suppose, the shock of the final event which had driven the whole affair below the threshold of memory, and so permitted me to enjoy many years of forgetfulness.

I was playing one afternoon when my stepmother brought the new governess to the nursery. I got up off the floor and found myself face to face with Miss Frost. A rather dumpy figure dressed in black, she seemed immeasurably old to me; probably she was about fifty. The skin of her face was very wrinkled and of an oily brown complexion I found disagreeable. Her only adornment was an old-fashioned locket which dangled on a chain from her neck as she bent forward peering at me. But it was her eyes, I think, that made me, with the unreasoning penetration of children, see something animal in her. They were an unusual colour for a human being — yellow flecked with orange. At first sight I did not like Miss Frost. But she was smiling at me, and I became fascinated by the width of her mouth and a glimpse of two fang-like eye-teeth. "Of course," I thought, "she's a laughing hyena," and I smiled back at her

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for a moment, glad to have placed her in my private category so quickly.

"So this is the little boy," she said, slightly stressing the last word. "I'm sure we shall understand each other in no time."

Though I never succeeded in understanding her, the days passed pleasantly enough. I even began to like Miss Frost. I found her good-natured, and easy-going during lessons. We were left very much to our own devices as my step-mother was still inconsolable over the death of my father. But occasionally she would come to see how I was getting on, and then Miss Frost would praise me extravagantly. In the interests of convenience I liked that; but I was well aware that during much of the time when I was supposed to be studying Miss Frost was dozing quietly in her chair. She slept a good deal, I noticed.

But on our walks she became a different person, active and tireless. She chattered and giggled and could almost be said to frisk. Indeed in some strange way she ceased to give me the impression of being any older than myself. I soon noticed that when we went out we were apt to be followed by a discreet retinue of stray dogs all of whom behaved considerably more sedately than we did.

"Why do the dogs follow us?" I asked her one afternoon when our attendants were particularly numerous. But the result was disconcerting because Miss Frost burst into tears. We had all come to a stop, and Miss Frost had begun to wipe her eyes when the dogs started a muted chorus of whines. Miss Frost spun round in a sudden fury and said something. I think it was a single word, but it meant nothing to me. The dogs, however, fled with their tails between their legs. Just for a moment Miss Frost seemed so formidable that I very nearly ran away myself. But she took my hand and marched me home in silence. After that no dog followed us on our walks. But often at night, especially when there was a high wind, I thought I could hear the long drawn out howl of a dog in the garden. It was all very odd. But children are apt, I think, to take for granted the peculiarities of grown-ups.

It was in the evening that Miss Frost impressed me most. She had an unusual talent for story telling. Each evening when I was tucked up she would sit on the edge of my bed and start to sway slightly from side to side. My eyes would be glued to the locket which always hung from her neck. It would swing on the end of its chain to and fro like the golden pendulum of a clock slowly ticking away the last seconds of the day. Then she would start on a story and I would listen spellbound. What were they about, those stories? I can only say that they produced in me a feverish excitement. For the strangest thing was that next morning I could never remember one word of what I had heard the night before. As the story approached its end (if it had one) Miss Frost's eyes would become very round indeed and I would forget the locket and lose myself staring into them until quite suddenly I was asleep.

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As a rule I would know nothing more until Miss Frost came into my room in the morning. My sleep at this time was heavy and, though I could remember nothing, I always felt that the night had been spent in outwitting hordes of fantastic dream enemies. But one night I awoke with a fleeting memory of my dream. I had been running away from Miss Frost and as I looked over my shoulder I noticed that her face was oddly altered. I just had time to see her drop on all fours before I opened my eyes. The nightlight still burnt dimly on the mantelpiece. But the door between Miss Frost's room and my own, which I thought was always left open, was shut. It didn't matter, I wasn't frightened. I was about to go back to sleep when I heard a curious, silvery sound from the next room. Miss Frost was laughing, I decided, after listening for a little. But in a strange way — not quite as if she were amused. It was rather pleasant, rather like a running brook. Then I realised that it was lasting a very long time for a laugh — perhaps it was a talking laugh. The idea amused me; I gave a little giggle myself. A minute or two later I realised that I was still giggling. It was only with quite an effort that I managed to stop. What was happening? I pinched myself to see if I really was awake. I was; and now I began to wonder if Miss Frost could be praying. I got out of bed and, with the child's expectation of being always welcome, softly opened the communicating door. Miss Frost was seated at a table sideways on to me, and there was still an undertone of high sound in the room coming, I supposed, from her. But what fascinated me was that though the room was dark her smiling face was clearly lit. I stood staring — then I saw that on the table was the locket she always wore round her neck, and that it was from this that the light was coming. Miss Frost, I thought, had not noticed me and I was just about to step forward and examine the marvellous object on the table when she turned her head and looked at me. We confronted each other as everything slowly faded — her smile, the light, and the sound. Then there came from Miss Frost what I can only describe as a growl. I turned and fled, slamming the door behind me. I was more disconcerted than frightened, though only the precarious confidence of children, I suppose, stood between me and terror. Anyway I went back to sleep.

In the morning I opened my eyes to find Miss Frost bending over my bed.

"Well, how are we now? Not frightened any more?"

"Frightened?" I echoed, trying to remember what had happened the night before.

"Don't you remember? You had a nightmare — I heard you calling out, and I came in and woke you up. Then I told you a story till you went to sleep again."

She was very cheerful, very solicitous. She bought me some sweets on our walk. Almost I believed her. But the locket dangling from her neck kept catching my eye.

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"What's in your locket?" I asked finally as we neared the house.

Miss Frost became coy. "Curiosity killed the cat!" she said looking over her shoulder a trifle nervously. "You wouldn't want to rob a poor old woman of her one secret, would you?" She gave my outstretched hand a playful pat.

But I would — I was exceedingly curious to look inside the locket. When we were back in the nursery I waited until it was gently rising and falling on the tide of Miss Frost's slumbering bosom as she lay back in her chair. I stole up to her and performed the delicate operation of floating it off the crest of the wave and into my hand. Before pressing the catch I looked up to make sure that I had not disturbed her. The locket fell out of my hand as I jumped back. One large yellow eye was regarding me. Miss Frost burst into peals of laughter.

"Boys are so cruel! Thought you'd catch your old nanny napping, didn't you? Instead of which she caught you!"

I relaxed. I even laughed too. I thought it was a delightful game she was playing. I still think so — but for a very different reason; and I omit the word *delightful*.

I determined to stay awake that night, and I racked my brains trying to think of how to be invisibly present while Miss Frost enjoyed her mysterious high-jinks with the locket. I promised myself to refrain from looking into her eyes during the evening story. But they drew my gaze irresistibly, and then my consciousness seemed to yield to hers and I fell asleep.

"Come along, there's a nice bath waiting for you," Miss Frost said brightly next morning.

I rubbed my eyes, trying to wake up. I felt very sleepy. I didn't want to get up.

"You have the bath," I said, and then I began to laugh. The idea of Miss Frost in the bath struck me as indescribably funny. What could she look like with nothing on? I felt sure her skin wasn't white like mine. And she was such a different shape.

"Thank you, I take mine in the evening. Now out of bed with you!"

So she did bathe! Suddenly a notion struck me. The locket! Surely she didn't wear that in her bath — she'd leave it in her bedroom, wouldn't she? And what was to stop me from making use of the opportunity to take a peep at it? I jumped out of bed as wide awake as possible.

I could hardly wait for the evening to come. The walk seemed interminable and afterwards, of course, she dozed in her chair. I was about to give her a pinch when she roused herself and went into her bedroom. I had paid so little attention to Miss Frost except in so far as she ministered to my comfort, or amusement, that I had no idea of her bath routine. But when I heard the sound of taps running it struck me as odd that I did not remember hearing them on any previous evening. Perhaps it was the grand bath night for laughing hyenas!

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Sure enough the sound of merriment and splashing came to my ears from the bathroom. It was time to act.

I went into her bedroom. With some trepidation I saw that the locket lay on the dressing table. I ran over and stopped dead with my hand hovering over it, a sudden prey to misgiving. Unformulated reasons urged me to leave it alone. But it was such a pretty, innocent object — old gold with a charming inlaid pattern — and what fun to outwit Miss Frost! I picked it up, pressed the catch, and the lid flew open. Under thick, rather milky glass there was nothing but a miniature of two beautiful white dogs sitting side by side, looking exceedingly aristocratic. It was quaint, and charming; but I was furious. I don't know what I had expected to find, but I felt cheated. "What a swiz!" I said loudly, rather hoping Miss Frost would hear. But even as I spoke things began to happen. Little clouds formed in the glass and began to spin and run together. In a few moments I could no longer see the dogs. And then the whole glass began to glow with a curious depthless luminosity. An overmastering excitement filled me. My hand, I noticed, had become extremely cold, the locket felt like ice. I put it down on the table and stared agog at the swirling lights which somehow resembled a snow blizzard. As I watched the turbulence slowly subsided, spots of colour began to show, until finally there was a perfect little picture of the garden as viewed from the house. It was night, and a full moon illuminated the lawn. How pretty, I thought; what a lovely toy this is. And then my heart missed a beat because in the background to the side of the rose-garden I thought I saw the branches of the elm tree sway slightly — and a moment later a tiny moving speck which might have been an owl. It couldn't be as magic as that, it just couldn't! But then something else happened. Whereas I had been looking at a tiny miniature of the garden the locket seemed now to become a kind of lens through which I was able to see as well as if I were in the picture myself. As this alteration became complete a figure I thought I recognised emerged from the house and glided onto the lawn. I held my breath as it came to a standstill peering up at the moon. Then I knew I was right, it was Miss Frost; and I'd caught her up to something or other. I found this deeply gratifying. But what could she be doing there in the middle of the night? And anyway it was only evening and she was in the bath tub, I hoped. But before I had time to become utterly confused she stretched out one arm and made a curious kind of beckoning sign while she slowly revolved herself through the points of the compass. Then, before my astonished eyes, from all corners of the garden there came a steady stream of dogs until there must have been twenty or thirty of them. There were small ones and large ones, and they frisked round Miss Frost and fawned on her before finally forming themselves into a circle in the middle of which she stood quiet as a statue. I do not quite know what happened next because I suddenly had an

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uneasy feeling that someone was standing behind me. I had left the bedroom door open, I remembered. I took my eyes off the locket for just long enough to make sure that Miss Frost was not there. But when I looked back the dogs were running in a pack out of the garden, and Miss Frost had disappeared. As the scene began to diminish and dissolve I realised that the sound of Miss Frost's cantilena had given way to an ominous silence. Now that I was definitely one up on her I did not want to run any more risk of being caught, and of having such an enthralling peepshow placed out of reach for the future. I shut the locket, which was no longer icy cold, and hurried back to the nursery.

I could not have been in higher spirits, and I already longed to find out more about Miss Frost's eccentric behaviour in the garden. I was far too excited to trouble my head about how the locket worked, or why. I accepted my privileged position as a snooper gratefully, almost as a matter of course. After a few minutes Miss Frost entered the nursery. I thought she looked at me a trifle curiously; but I dismissed that. I felt very affectionate. I ran up to her. "Dear Miss Frost," I said giving her a hug, "did you enjoy your bath? Do you feel all clean?"

The next day Miss Frost was more than usually indulgent. She slept all through lesson time; and then we took my favourite walk — past the sweet-shop (pausing for a bag of bull's-eyes), and along a footpath on top of the railway embankment. Not long after we returned I heard the bath water being run. I hurried to the locket.

It went rapidly to work. I had only time to glimpse the guardian angels, as I in my exalted good humour chose to call the two white dogs, before I was staring at the moonlit garden. Again Miss Frost came walking onto the lawn. This time I determined to miss nothing. I didn't dare blink as before my eyes an astonishing event took place. Miss Frost turned to look at the house a moment as though to make sure of being unobserved. Then all in a flash she altered shape, became smaller, and dropped on all fours. She was a dog — there couldn't be any mistake about it. I was enchanted. I wish I could do that, I thought as I watched her running round the garden, sniffing at bushes, and raising her muzzle to the moon. Suddenly I noticed that what I took to be a cat had appeared on the side of the lawn. It froze as it became aware of the dog Frost. It should have turned and run because with one leap Miss Frost was upon it. There was something wild and horrible in the way she seized it, shook it once violently, and tossed it behind a bush — something horrible; and yet in a way fascinating. It was with very mixed emotions that I watched the garden fade and the guardian angels reappear. But it was my cue to retire, I was sure. For they were on my side; they were not going to allow me to be caught by the peculiar Miss Frost. I returned to the nursery. I didn't know what to make of it all. I wasn't quite sure that spying on Miss Frost was

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such fun after all, though I hesitated to admit that it was frightening.

The next morning after breakfast I wandered alone into the garden. With unwilling steps I approached the bush which I remembered from the evening before. I peeped behind it. There, with its neck very obviously broken, and some horrid flies round its eyes, lay the cat from next door. For a moment I gazed at it remembering what a nice cat it was, and how I used to stroke it. Then I ran back to the house with the tears streaming down my face.

"Whatever's the matter?" Miss Frost asked me as she tried to wipe my eyes.

"Horrid . . . cruel . . . dog!" I managed to get out through my howls; then I tore loose from Miss Frost, ran into my bedroom, and flung myself exhausted on the bed. From the nursery came the sound of Miss Frost's raucous laughter.

At that age one is resilient, I suppose. One's moods change quickly and easily, and are forgotten. In any case by evening Miss Frost had succeeded in lulling me into a feeling of relative security, though I no longer viewed her as a harmless old lady with the fairy-tale gift of transforming herself into a dog at will. Nor did I still delight in having spied upon her. At her bath time I remained innocently in the nursery. Thus two or three days went by. I came to the conclusion that the locket had allowed me to look into the future — that I had watched Miss Frost's activities a few hours before they had occurred. It was several more days before my self-assurance began to return; and my curiosity. Once more, I said to myself, I'll look once more, and then never again. Several days I said this to myself, and each time an inner prompting held me back. But one day I became cross with Miss Frost just before her bath time. I believe she deliberately provoked me. In a spirit of petty revenge I went boldly into her room and opened the locket. I had still time to change my mind for it was a minute or two before the glass began to cloud. Then it was too late because the old excitement returned. I watched impatiently the guardian angels disappear and the garden come into view. But was that the garden? There was the cedar tree, and the grass — but what were those fences doing there, and where was the rose garden? I couldn't believe my eyes. I began to be scared because other things were different too. I felt lost and insubstantial — yet I seemed to be much more in the picture than ever before. I wanted to snap the locket shut, or just run away; but I could not move. Against my will I watched two figures come out of the house — a man and a dog. I knew the dog; I had seen Miss Frost turn herself into it before. But the man? He stopped in the middle of the grass with the dog Frost prancing round him. I had a good view of him for the moon was uncannily bright and I seemed to have been brought right up close to them. Something about the man compelled my attention, something familiar. He was a young man, and I found him both attractive and repellent. I couldn't take my eyes from his face. But it was quivering, altering, the nose

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shooting out and the ears coming to points. The body dropped, and the next second two dogs in a frenzy of delight were frisking and gambolling round each other. Then, side by side, they leaped a fence and were gone into the night.

I do not know how I got back into the nursery. But when next I became aware of myself I was standing in the middle of the room, trembling all over. I was unable to think, though a host of urgent ideas seemed to be pressing in upon me. I could only tremble and wait. When at last Miss Frost, wearing the locket, appeared, something snapped in me and I shouted at her.

"It's your locket — you've got to tell me what it means — you must, you must, you must . . . " I began to laugh hysterically until Miss Frost slapped my face. That brought me to my senses. We stood looking at each other silently.

Then Miss Frost broke into a curious little jig, singing as she bobbed up and down: "Ah ha! my pretty, I've caught you. He who sees himself in the locket, sooner or later's in my pocket! We'll be meeting again . . . "

"I'm a boy!" I screamed. "I don't want to be a horrid dog like you — I won't be a dog, I won't, I won't, I won't . . . "

"But you will, my pretty," she chanted, still in a hateful kind of sing-song, "you'll love it. We'll go a-hunting together, for ever and ever and ever."

I lost all control. I wanted to thrust something away in violence. I rushed to the piano and hit the keys as hard as I could with my clenched fists. I ran to Miss Frost and tugged at the locket with all my force. The chain broke, but Miss Frost wrenched the locket out of my hand and, I think, hit me, for I remember no more. I came to myself in bed. Someone with a very kind face was sitting near me. "I'm your new governess, Miss Bird," she said.

That is what came back to me in that empty room which had been my nursery. It came instantaneously, and then my present-day mind began to consider it. I looked at the dog. It lay at my feet with its head between its paws, looking up at me out of large yellow eyes flecked with orange — eyes that I remembered. A feeling of horror swept over me. I must kill the dog. It was evil, it must be utterly destroyed — at once, before it was too late. But as I took a step towards it my will seemed to ebb. It wagged its tail, got up, and started for the door. I found myself following it down the stairs and out into the garden. It began to gambol playfully around me. Then it ran to the fence and paused looking back at me with hideous, unmistakable invitation in its eyes. Then it leaped over and was gone.

I wrote this account several weeks ago, and on reading it over I cannot understand how I could have been so neurotic. I've been back to the house often since then. It's really a very nice dog, it loves to play. And I find I can buy the house for a song.

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There is one important volume of modern fantasy stories which you will not find in Everett F. Bleiler's CHECKLIST; *and yet it was Mr. Bleiler, promptly repairing his omission, who steered us to R. Ellis Roberts'* THE OTHER END (*London: Palmer, 1923*). *The twelve singular stories in this collection have a living sense of the Older Rites that may recall Arthur Machen to you — and along with that an imaginative and unconventional, though not unorthodox, Christian theology that may suggest Charles Williams. The title story is particularly touching: a fresh and fanciful concept, related by one of the most skillfully sketched self-damning fools in the English short story.*

The Other End

by R. ELLIS ROBERTS

I HAVE been accused, very unjustly, of culpable neglect in the affair of Terence Burke. Those who have brought the accusation are persons, I gather, with little or no sense of the ordinary decencies of society, and the limits of tutorial interference. One of the greatest difficulties of the mixed state of modern society is that one is constantly meeting individuals who are really practically anarchic in their view of human intercourse, and who have no sense of those comely gradations which alone make possible the true structure of English life.

My dear mother, who is a Conyng of Conyng, always impressed on me that nothing, except imminent danger to one's faith or one's wife, could ever justify a breach of the recognised social rules: fortunately the Established religion, of which I am of course an adherent, is never in danger of an extreme kind, and as a bachelor I lack the other incentive to overstep those canons which govern our intercourse with our fellow creatures.

Still, I can see that even well conditioned people, persons of birth and breeding, might look askance on my share in the Burke tragedy, and so I have thought right to set down the precise course of the incidents from the time I entered Sir Humphrey Burke's house. Indeed, seeing that the Duke of Munster, whom Sir Humphrey always claimed as a cadet of his house, has said frequently that "if it had not been for that little snipe of a tutor, poor Terry would never have suffered," I must insist upon putting before the Duke and the public a clear statement of the whole business.

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My mother always admitted she had made a mistake in marrying William Smith. It alienated the Conyngs, and when Mr. Smijth (my mother insisted of course on his reverting to the old spelling) died the year after their marriage, my mother was left very badly off. I do not think that she had more than four thousand a year, and it was with difficulty that she sent me to a decent school and to Oxford. Herbert Conyng, her brother, who lived in wicked ease at Albany, refused to help her; and it is to her self-denial that I owe the education I gained at Eton and Christ Church. After I had left the House, I was rather at a loss for a living. My mother had hoped I would take Holy Orders: but two things deterred me. I am a man of exceptional intellect and great critical ability, and I could not quite make the Articles of the Church tally with what I saw was reasonable. Then, while I might have accepted Orders in the Church of the earlier part of the century, I was naturally revolted at the growth of degrading superstition and idolatry, fostered by the distressing *intransigeants* of the Oxford Movement and the Ritualistic conspiracy.

So I determined to find, if I could, a suitable tutorship and use that perhaps as a stepping-stone to the foundation of a decent private school, a thing which England sadly lacks. Owing to my independence of mind my actual career at Oxford was not academically noteworthy. Indeed I only secured a pass in my Honour Moderations, and a fourth class in History finals: but, as my tutor said in a testimonial he was good enough to write, "my classes in the schools in no way represented my real ability." (It is true he was heard, in explaining this testimonial, to say that "he had spoken the strict truth, as Conyng-Smijth's ability could not fairly be represented by Omega" — but this injudicious pleasantry I attribute to his habitual over-indulgence in sherry.)

So I gave my name — about this time I dropped the Smijth — to the Appointments Committee, and went to my mother's exiguous but comfortable Brighton cottage, until I should hear of any position which a gentleman could with propriety accept.

While I was at Brighton I earned a little pocket money by acting as a witness for the Spy Association, and provided a good deal of pungent evidence for the Royal Commission on Ecclesiastical Disorders which was then sitting.

It was indeed just after I had been present at Exposition — a piece of disgusting and childish idolatry — at the notorious church of St. Bartholomew, that I found the first communication I had had from the Appointments Committee. The letter of the Secretary was, I thought, oddly abrupt:

> Dear Mr. Conyng,
>
> I don't know if this post will suit you. Sir Humphrey Burke does not seem to be particular in his requirements. Will you write to him if you care about the post.
>
> Yours truly, A. B. Nixon.

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He enclosed a small type-written sheet which ran as follows:

> Sir Humphrey Burke requires a tutor for his nephew, a boy of twelve. Terence Burke is difficult, sulky and backward. He needs a firm hand. Sir Humphrey requires a gentleman, Eton and Christ Church, if possible. Academical distinction is not necessary. Applicant must be a convinced Protestant. Please apply to Sir Humphrey Burke, Oakridge House, Beaminster, Dorset.

On the whole I liked the tone of this advertisement; and after looking up Burke in Debrett, I wrote to Sir Humphrey, and stated that I might be willing to accept the position, if the remuneration was sufficient, and if I thought the post likely to do justice to my powers. Sir Humphrey's answer was extremely courteous: I keep all papers of importance and am able to quote it in full:

> Dear Sir,
>
> Of the many applications I have had, yours strikes me most favourably. My nephew is to enter at Harrow, if possible, next year. He is already far overdue. I will be frank with you. He is a fanciful, idle boy, and, I fear, has tendencies to vice. I have had four tutors for him in the last year: the first left because, he said, Terence was stupid: the others because they differed from me on the necessity for discipline. The salary I offer is at the rate of £200 a year. You will live in the house, and yourself be responsible for the hours of work, etc. I am a widower, and live alone here, save for Terence. If you think the post suitable, can you kindly be here in a week from to-day?
>
> Yours faithfully, HUMPHREY BURKE.

After consultation with my mother, I decided to accept the post. I had no doubt as to my capacity to manage the boy, and I could not but recognise that the terms offered were far above the average.

So on Thursday, September 21st, 190—, I took the train for Bridport.

There are people who profess to admire the country in the West of England. Dorset, it is true, has not the offensive bleakness of character which makes Cornwall impossible for civilized beings; but as I drove out from Bridport, I was not at all favourably impressed with my surroundings. The immense fields given over to a few cattle, the irregular formation of the hills, the staccato aspect (as Miles of Trinity once put it) of a few solitary trees on the horizon, all struck me as extremely displeasing. Still, I admit there was a gentle warmth in the air, and when the conveyance entered the drive of Oakridge House, I was prepared to be pleasantly moved. The drive, which was short, led up to a small Georgian house. There were, I afterwards found, only ten bedrooms and four or five attics. Two of the four reception rooms were a fair size, but the study in which I had to work with Terence could not have been much more than thirty feet by twenty-five. Still, though there was no billiard room, the general ap-

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pearance of the house was one of quite adequate comfort and decent gentility.

I was received at the door, not as I had hoped, by Sir Humphrey, but by a large person who supposed I was the new tutor. Having satisfied her on this point she condescended to explain that Sir Humphrey was at a magistrates' meeting, but would be in before long, and that meanwhile, after I had been to my room, tea would be served in the study — the small room I have already mentioned — and that Master Terence would be available for inspection.

The windows of my bedroom, to which I was conducted by a maid-servant of unnecessary plainness, looked out over an undulating and considerable stretch of parkland. It was kept, I noticed, rather poorly — but that of course might be due to the fad of some eccentric gardener. There are people who profess to admire wildness instead of the more gracious lines of classical and Italian landscape. For myself, Protestant as I am, I have always felt that the more spacious and severe styles are better suited to a civilised and rational people than the gloomy Gothic of the barbarous middle ages. I made a leisurely toilette, and came down to the study. There I found Terence Burke waiting for me.

Since the unfortunate incident which has compelled me to commence authorship, many people, including some of the ruder sort of journalist, have examined me as to my "first impressions" of Terence. They seem to think that his unusual history must enshroud a peculiar personality, or at the least, a striking appearance. They picture him as a kind of innocent Byron, a less experienced Shelley. He was, as it happens, a perfectly ordinary boy in appearance: and what was not ordinary in his character was only to be deprecated by persons of sound judgment. (May we not say this of all deviations from the ordinary? And would not its general admission preserve us from much foolish adventure and heady admirations?) Terence was short for his age; he was good looking in an Irish way. There was not enough determination about the jaw, and there was too much weakness — miscalled sensitiveness by the Duke of Munster — about the mouth. He had curly fair hair, bright blue eyes, and his face, near the nose, was slightly freckled. He was well built, but had the legs of a boy who rides over much; and he combined a superficial politeness with, as I was afterwards to discover, an astonishing capacity for being deaf to what displeased or fatigued him.

Sir Humphrey told me that his nephew took after his mother, who was a Smith O'Brien, a family notorious for its disloyalty and Popish proclivities, but otherwise distinguished enough: and this may explain Sir Humphrey's animosity towards his nephew. Terence was an orphan: his father was killed in the South African War, and his mother died — she was an over-emotional woman — not very long afterwards. Up till then, I subsequently discovered, Terence had been nominally a Catholic. His mother of course was a Papist: and

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his father belonged to that malicious party in the Church of England which is indistinguishable in its devices and devotions from the Roman Catholic heresy. By a providential dispensation, neither Mr. nor Mrs. Burke left any will or appointed any guardians or trustees: so Sir Humphrey, in taking the child to his house, felt at complete liberty to ignore the parents' superstition, and brought Terence up as a sound Protestant. That he was not more successful must be taken as evidence of the terrible, undermining power of the Romish faith: for though Terence sat through morning prayer at the chapel which Sir Humphrey had built in his grounds — the parish church at Beaminster, though not actually Romish, was far too advanced — he was admittedly "bored" with the gospel-service, and retained loving recollections of Rosary, and Benediction, and Mass.

I had no vaticinations as to my position as I shook hands with my pupil in the study and told him to sit down, and tell me about himself. I anticipated a dull time, but I could see no signs of the disorder or unruliness which the advertisement in the paper had led me to expect. Terence was polite, even a little formal, in address. He had no tendency to chatter, and I felt justified in congratulating myself on my perspicacity in selecting the position. I found out during tea that Terence was not at all backward in his studies. He had an almost unaccountable enthusiasm for the Latin poets, and I did not always find it easy — having of course not looked at the Classics since Moderations — to remember his exact allusions. He seemed to have read nearly the whole of Walker's "Corpus," except Lucan, Silvius Italicus and Juvenal. In discussing the last named — certain of whose satires I took as a special book — he became almost voluble.

"Please, Mr. Conyng" (I was glad to notice he gave the "o" its right value) "don't you think Juvenal is horrid? I don't see why he should have written in such a rage: I gave him up after the first satire. I can't stand people being furious with other chaps. It doesn't seem to help somehow."

"Ah, but you must remember, Terence, that Juvenal had a very sad state of society to cope with. The unmentionable vices of the Roman Empire needed the poet's rhetoric to quell them ——"

"Oh, were people so very much better then after Juvenal, Mr. Conyng?"

This question unfortunately found me unprepared. Roman History is a Greats, not a Mods subject; and I really did not know quite what improvements the satirist effected. So I took refuge in the undoubted fact that we don't quite know when Juvenal wrote, and that therefore it is difficult to ascertain positively if his satire improved society. Terence seemed unwilling to drop the subject, and so I deftly turned the conversation by asking him how far he had got on with his Horace.

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"I've read most of him, Mr. Conyng. I hate a lot of the Odes; but his satires are rather jolly, and so are the epistles."

So far as I can remember, these sentences accurately represent Terence's manner of talking: so it will be seen he did not greatly differ from the normal boy, except by the avoidance of the more distressing vulgarisms such as "top-hole," "hot-stuff" and "the limit" — an avoidance attributable, I fancy, to the fact that he had not yet been to a school.

I attempted to question him about his previous tutors, and their reasons for leaving. Here he was curiously uncommunicative. His answers became abrupt, and his manner not so much uneasy as absurdly dignified, almost as if he thought I was being unduly inquisitive.

Finally, "I think you had better ask my uncle, Mr. Conyng," he replied: and made it inconvenient to continue the conversation. And a little later I dismissed him to his play.

Sir Humphrey came in shortly afterwards. This unfortunate gentleman has met with a great deal of obloquy. I grant that he was unwise and hasty; but I have no reason for supposing that he did not believe himself to be swayed by the best of motives. Certainly no one could have been a more considerate host. He was full of apologies for his absence on my arrival, but trusted I would excuse an apparent discourtesy committed on the grounds of public duty. He seemed to have a very sound view of the position of the Conyngs, while professing a humorous preference for the Celtic families with which he was connected. He begged me to excuse any seeming incivility in the servants. "I know," he said, "that Mrs. Hansford has an odd manner. But she's an honest housekeeper, and looks after the other servants. And she's a good Protestant." We chatted then a little about affairs at Brighton, and about the degraded type of person, with neither birth nor breeding, now too frequently raised to the Episcopal bench. It is true that some people more suspicious than I am might have thought that Sir Humphrey was rather long in coming to the subject of his nephew; but I thought his delay showed a real delicacy and a genuine wish to treat me as a guest rather than as a tutor. I did, however, at last mention Terence myself; and I was, I confess, a little surprised when Sir Humphrey replied, quite casually and shortly:

"Ah! yes. So you've seen him. Odd boy, very; wants discipline."

I find on re-reading this that I have given no idea of Sir Humphrey's appearance. It is no use pretending that it is prepossessing. Apart from his extremely short stature, and the tendency to an obesity greater than is usual among gentlepeople, his actual features cannot be regarded as other than displeasing. I noticed immediately the large mouth, the rather cold and uneasy eye; an eye which I have heard Mrs. Hansford unfairly describe as shifty, and the oddly undeveloped eyebrows. Even so, had Sir Humphrey only conformed

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with the style his appearance suggested, and worn the ample beard of our grandfathers, he could have posed quite well as a representative of the honest, plain, rough English country gentleman. But his unfortunate trick of shaving the upper lip clean, and leaving a fringe of hair round the cheek and under the chin seemed to be a wanton insistence on the original defects of his countenance. Still, I think it absurd to lay so much stress, as is now the fashion, on personal appearance. Sir Humphrey's manner was excellent; his table was exceptionally good, and his cellar stocked with real taste — though I could not agree with his overvaluation of the Burgundy of 1900 against that of 1904: and when I retired that evening I congratulated myself on my unerring sense in finding a house where the work promised to be light, the society that of gentlefolk, and the remuneration more than the pittance so often given to men in my position.

Extract from Terence Burke's Diary.

"The new Tutor came yesterday. He's no use, except that he has some books. He sucks up to Uncle Humphrey like anything, and I don't believe he's got any pluck at all. Still, I got off last night and went to sleep pretty soon. She came just about three o'clock, and this time we got out of the side-door. It seemed longer than usual; but it was like heaven when we got there. She insists that there are still difficulties in the way; but promises that I shall see the Other End in a week. And that will mean no more horribleness. She told me last night that most of them do believe in Jesus and Mary: that those who didn't have gone. I asked her 'where' — but she didn't seem to understand. 'Just gone, Terence, you know —' 'You mean they aren't anywhere — they're nowhere?' 'Oh — no! That's quite different, that happened to the Greek things, Pan and Apollo and things like that. They're nowhere: and they can come out. But those of us who couldn't believe just went. They're quite safe: and they wouldn't hurt anything. But of course it has made a lot of difference to the trees.' 'It must have,' I said. I put this down, because if I ever do meet some one clever and decent, I'll ask him about everything. I could have asked old Fellowes, if he hadn't drank so much. I'm sure I can never tell Mr. Conyng anything about anything, or ask anything except information and things."

Mr. Conyng's Story.

I had been at Oakridge for two days and, except for two slight incidents requiring the prayerful consideration of a Christian and the discretion of a Conyng, nothing untoward had occurred. I always make it a rule to familiarise myself, in so far as it is possible and convenient, with the habits of those I am living with. To know how much an after-dinner nap is valued, to remember whether your host really dislikes offering you his newspaper first, to be cer-

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tain about the hour of meals and the appetite of one's fellow-diners are all matters which only the reckless or the ill-bred will neglect. For proper consideration, however, one needs a fair amount of what some people call inquisitiveness: and though by temperament averse from meddling in others' affairs, I refuse to neglect any opportunities which a little patience enables me to seize. So, when on the second evening I heard a strange noise while I was dressing, I felt bound to investigate.

I slipped into my dressing gown — a really handsome article of red silk, made from some vestments very properly taken from an Italian monastery — and went into the passage. The noise here was more distinct. It was a kind of thud, as of wood falling on some softer material, and it seemed to come from one of the rooms. I knocked lightly at Sir Humphrey's door, but there was no response. I was just going to walk on and knock at Terence's, who had already retired for the night, when his door opened, and Sir Humphrey came out, looking rather flushed. He had a smile on his face, and his eyes were not quite so cold as usual. (My capacity to observe minute details is, I believe, the only trait I inherit from my father. Mr. Smith was high up in the Toast and Tape Department, where the duties involve a very close attention to detail.) He seemed a little surprised to see me, so I stepped forward and said:

"Oh! Sir Humphrey, I thought I heard an unusual noise; I was about to investigate its source. Possibly it was Terence at some prank?"

"I'm glad you noticed it, Conyng [Sir Humphrey had asked my leave to drop the formal Mr.]. You remember I asked you not to whip Terence at any time?"

"Yes, indeed. I shouldn't dream of going against your wishes."

"No. Well, now I'll tell you my reasons. I flog him myself — when he needs it. And he needs it most nights. He's a deceitful, and I'm afraid, lecherous young cub."

"Surely, Sir Humphrey, that is — is — a little strong. A boy so young can hardly — well — scarcely be susceptible to the charges you hint at."

"I didn't hint, Conyng, I know. And I daresay we can work together to cure him."

With that he ended our conversation by going into his room.

I returned to mine, to ponder over this strange information, and to make a note of how early the worst effects of Romanist superstition can show themselves, and how difficult it is for any one to eradicate them.

The next incident occurred the following morning after luncheon. Sir Humphrey asked me to come with him to his smoking room, as he wished to discuss something of importance. When I joined him there, I found him ready with an account of Terence's general character and temperament. As a rule, as I may have indicated, Sir Humphrey was a man of blunt language and quick

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expression; but on the subject of Terence he was strangely vague. Indeed, had he been of a different class, I should say he was guilty of something approaching verbiage. So I shall make no attempt to reproduce the exact form of his communication; but will give the substance in as few words as possible.

The root of the trouble was that Terence was at heart a Papist. ("A bloody Papisher" was Sir Humphrey's expression. His family is a Belfast one.) His conformity with Protestant forms of worship was purely superficial: and though Sir Humphrey had broken an idol of the boy's — an image of the Virgin Mary — and had smashed his crucifix, and taken away his rosary, it does not seem that he had managed to wean the boy's affections from his early superstition. That these superstitions had bred their inevitable crop of sensuality Sir Humphrey believed with a conviction I was unable to share. I had no doubt, of course — no Protestant with the history of Rome writ in lustful letters for him to read could have any doubt — that the boy would, unless cured, fall a victim to evil practices; but I could not think that Terence, who was an honest, plain-spoken youth, had yet acquired any disgraceful habits or formed any dishonourable connection. This I told to Sir Humphrey with a firmness which I think impressed him. And I hope my accusers will take notice that on the matter principally under discussion, I from the first defended Terence. My subsequent action was dictated not from doubt of the boy, but a desire to satisfy my employer, and, if possible, to rid his mind of an ungenerous suspicion.

Did I then agree to the floggings? On this matter I refused to be cross-examined. Here I will state plainly that I acted for the best. Had I known the severity of the floggings I might have protested; but Terence did not complain, and I have no personal experience to guide me. To say, as the Duke did, that any man, except one with the skin of a rhinoceros, the brain of a bullfinch, and the heart of a snake, would know a cat o' nine tails hurt like the devil, is to assume a knowledge of penal instruments which is no part of a decent education. Sir Humphrey was a gentleman: he used a stick to which nine small cords were attached. Therefore such an instrument was one which could properly be used by a gentleman in correcting his nephew. I know it is the fashion now to sneer at the syllogism, but I can see no flaw in that. I did hint to Sir Humphrey that his floggings were rather frequent; but he assured me that Terence was a hot-blooded, lustful young devil and needed cooling. And he did, after all, know the boy far better than I did, or any of his critics. For if years of close intercourse do not constitute personal knowledge, what, I may ask, does?

I have still to disclose the request Sir Humphrey made me: compliance with which has brought me so much blame.

To support his suspicion of Terence's character, he informed me that once he had met the boy walking in his sleep. That he had stopped him without

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waking him, and that Terence tried to get past, saying "He must go and meet her." I pointed out that this was scarcely evidence of any sound kind. Terence might have been dreaming of his mother, or even of the Virgin Mary. Sir Humphrey then said:

"Well, Conyng, there may be something in what you say. So I'll ask you this. Will you help me to find out? We can make certain: but you must help me. Terence keeps a diary. If we could find that, I believe we'd find out what the young scamp is up to."

Sir Humphrey spoke almost jocularly. He seemed to have thrown off the anger which marked his earlier disclosures. Many people — once more the Duke of Munster has been most conspicuous — have called me "lick-spittle spy," "cringing toad" and similar opprobrious nicknames, which only serve to betray their singular lack of taste and ignorance of manners, without in the least affecting my reputation. I agree that I might have declined to accept the task offered to me. It is not part of a tutor's duties to discover what his pupil writes, or where he keeps his diary; but it is, I conceive, a tutor's duty to do all he can to clear up a misunderstanding between his pupil and the boy's guardian. None of my critics have shown how I could have done better:* I, at least, did not, like my predecessors, forsake my position directly its difficulties were apparent. No: I told Sir Humphrey I should need a short time for consideration and prayer; and then I was guided to accept the charge, and pledged myself to discover where Terence Burke kept his diary; and to hand the book over, when found, to the boy's uncle.

Extract from Terence Burke's Diary.

"Mr. Conyng — it's funny I should write him always 'Mr.' — has been here four days now. I found him in my room this afternoon. He'd come in to leave me a book — something about bees by a man called Maeterlinck, which was rather decent of him. I wish I liked him more: but he's so frightfully pally with Uncle. I can't make him out. Unless he's an awful duffer, he must have found out about the floggings: and most of them did something when they did. Poor old Fellowes would have left straight away and fetched a bobby, I believe; but Uncle made him frightfully tipsy at dinner — and then buzzed him for being boozed. Somehow Uncle has always got the better of them: I suppose he always will. But I do get so tired of it. Please, Mary, help me. Mary, help of Christians, pray for me.

* I dismiss as puerile the Duke of Munster's inept suggestion that I had no duties but to call in the police, or an Inspector of the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children. As a sound Tory, I could not betray a man of my own class to the officials of a discredited and dishonourable Government, even had I been satisfied that Sir Humphrey had exceeded the rights of his position. Nor, of course, could I encourage any society that habitually disregards the sacred claims of the family.

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"Jesus, by Thy Stripes, help me to bear it.
"Amen."

"She was awfully good to me last night. But she won't talk about Mr. Conyng. Except she says, 'Oh! he'll help, Terry, I think.' And *I* think he's much the unlikeliest. She says they are never allowed to explain ways to us, or else she'd love to tell me. But I am certain to get to the Other End before Sunday. It's Thursday now. I don't know what will happen at the Other End; but she says it is more beautiful than anything ever thought of. And that nothing will ever hurt again."

Mr. Conyng's Story.

As I have determined to be perfectly candid in this narrative, I will here say frankly that I had qualms, not about the propriety, but about the necessity of finding Terence Burke's diary. Clever as the boy was in certain ways, he was also childishly simple. I discovered that he "believed" in fairies; that he had stuffed his mind with a great deal of foolish folk lore, and that he was sensitive to a degree almost indecent in a civilised person. He possessed also that curious quality of charm which, in my opinion, is always more suitably found in a woman. Terence had a vein of obstinacy which might pass for character; and he certainly had "pluck" to an unusual extent. But that pluck can subsist along with great weakness we know from the fact that not a few women have been capable of that quality. What most distracted me, however, in my search for Terence's private papers was his straightforward attitude to myself. He might, I can see, have embarrassed me by appeals about the flogging. He might have put me in the awkward position of an arbiter between his uncle and himself; and even though, as it appears from his diary, he refrained from doing this not through generosity, but from a misconception of my character, I was at the time grateful to him.

I have been asked why I did not directly question Terence about his diary, and demand its production. The truth is, I was sceptical as to the existence of any document except perhaps a boyish scrawl of daily events, diversified with boyish comments. And I should have felt foolishly embarrassed if Terence had calmly given me some little note-book with innocent and inane remarks in it. Still, I admit to a feeling of unpleasantness when Terence found me in his room one day. I had, of course, provided myself with an excuse, and he seemed to be genuinely glad to be lent a foolish book about bees. I had scarcely had time to look diligently through his things, but I had searched his desk, and a locker behind his bed. There I found an improvised rosary which I suppose I ought to have taken; but I remembered that to do so would inevitably show him that some one had been through his things; so, sorely against my conscience, I left it.

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On Thursday, Sir Humphrey flogged Terence again. He asked me to be present, and I rashly consented. I say "rashly," for, when the time came, I found an excuse to be away. The reason was one I could scarcely explain to Sir Humphrey. I was in his smoking room, and, remembering how cunning people are at hiding things, I was struck with the possibility that Terence might have hidden his diary in the smoking room. So I began a search there. I found a good many interesting things. There was a series of French novels of the type known as "facetious"; and a very curious book called "Nero" with ugly plates of men being flogged. There were also some stories by a man with the odd name of Masoch. These I glanced at hurriedly, and with a certain surprise at Sir Humphrey's taste in literature. But what decided me against being present at the flogging was my discovery of the instrument used. I have already described it: the little cords, of which it was composed, were covered with coagulated blood. Now, from childhood, I have been susceptible to the sight of blood, and it had not occurred to me till then that whipping a boy actually drew blood. So on the plea of a headache I excused myself from the distasteful duty of seeing Terence whipped.

He was evidently a boy of considerable strength, for he seemed little the worse the next morning. Still, I felt that it would be better for the whippings to cease, so I made up my mind to discover the diary. With this end I gave Terence a holiday after 11.00 on Friday. His Popish training was not sufficient to prevent him accepting it with considerable glee, and I took precautions to have an uninterrupted search. I have been blamed for this. On this point I did not expect understanding from the coarse-minded of my critics. But I should have expected those who have some claim to gentility, to realize that I "got Terence out of the way," as they put it, not only to facilitate my search, but in order to spare his feelings. My search, as all who are interested in the case know, was successful; but I must delay the story while I interpolate another extract from the diary itself.

From Terence Burke's Diary.

"Mr. Conyng gave me a day off to-day. I wonder why. I hate being so suspicious, but things seem upset in this room somehow. I went off, of course, to Little Gap, and She was there, and we had a gorgeous time. It was ripping. She told me why they chose oaks: the Other End is much better than with ordinary trees, and lasts longer. And the oak seems to be more hospitable than other trees: and more of them came in when Jesus was born. It is funny that trees and things and They should have known all about Jesus and Mary before human beings. She says it is because of the difference in time. Their time is vertical, while ours is horizontal; and some things, like the Olympians, have their time just abrupt.

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"There were a lot of Them there to-day, and they all seemed glad to see me — but I love Her more than any of the rest. She knows more about us than most of them do.

"And She promised me again that I should get to the Other End before Sunday. And this is Friday. I wonder ——"

Here the diary ends.

Mr. Conyng's Story.

When I told Sir Humphrey that I had found the diary he was inordinately pleased. He had expected me to take it away; but I told him that I could not consent to that. I thought he had better ask Terence for it, or else remove it himself. It was hidden below a loose board underneath the bed, and the state of the floor showed that the housemaid had taken her duties very lightly. I complained of this to Mrs. Hansford, and I regret to say that she merely replied "she liked a man to be a man, and not to go mucking round looking for mistakes in the work of poor hard working gels, which wasn't their business."

Sir Humphrey determined on a plan which I thought unnecessarily elaborate.

"Look here, Conyng. That young imp thinks he's rid of us after we've gone down to dinner. I expect it's then he writes in the diary. Well, I'll put dinner back to-night. I'll give him half an hour, and at quarter past eight when he thinks we are safe in the dining room, we'll go up and, dam-me, I believe we shall find him at his book."

Nothing would persuade him to take a less theatrical course. He was annoyed at not having thought before that Terence must write in the evening. I believe he felt it was impossible for the boy to do anything after the flogging. I pointed out to him that we should probably have a scene — but he declared his indifference to scenes. So at about 8:25 we went up. The scene was most unpleasant. Terence seemed completely taken aback: he did and said nothing, until Sir Humphrey seized the diary in which he was writing. Then the boy became furious. He rushed at his uncle. He kicked, and struggled and wrestled. He threatened his uncle and me with horrible penalties if we ever read a bit of the book. None of this bad behaviour, of course, had any effect; but I could not help regretting that Terence had been given the excuse for displaying it. I have sometimes allowed myself to think that Sir Humphrey was not sufficiently careful to avoid giving cause of offence. No doubt we cannot take quite literally the injunction and the warning in the Gospels about "causing one of these little ones to stumble"; but there seems no doubt, strange as it appears to us, that the Founder of our Religion expected His followers to be particularly careful in their relations to children. Still, it was evidently impossible to yield to

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passion, and Sir Humphrey and I left Terence, and went away with the diary. I returned a few minutes afterwards, and found the boy prone on his bed still in a storm of emotion which, I pointed out, could only be injurious to his health and annoying to his elders. I am sorry to say he did not appreciate my attention, and so far forgot himself as to exclaim that he now saw I was the sneakiest of the lot. Seeing it was useless to attempt reasonable remonstrances I left him, and joined Sir Humphrey in the dining room. Owing to this unfortunate policy of taking Terence "in the act" the entrée, I remember, was dreadfully overcooked. That Sir Humphrey was greatly disturbed is sufficiently shown by the fact that he omitted to comment on this, although he was a man who was generally quite plain-spoken about the details of his dinner.

After dinner Sir Humphrey began the serious reading of the diary. The character of that work can be judged by the extracts I have given. It was almost entirely occupied with the affairs of the mysterious being whom Terence invariably referred to as "She." Sir Humphrey saw in this preoccupation evidence of his worst suspicions. I, with an acumen for which no one has given me credit, saw that Terence was not wicked but either a maker of fairy tales or a sufferer from mental weakness. Still, I could not deny that, unless the whole diary was a farrago of rather feeble fiction, it contained evidences that Terence believed himself to be in the habit of keeping assignations with some one feminine. The place of the assignation was kept singularly obscure. There were many references to the Great Tree, to Little Gap, to the Kind Hedge, to Silver Pool. But there was no indication where these fancifully named things were. I tried to assure Sir Humphrey that this fantastic nomenclature was almost proof that Terence had simply been romancing like a school-girl — but he would have none of it. He summoned Mrs. Hansford, and without disclosing his reasons, asked her if she had ever heard of a place called Little Gap.

"Of course, Sir Humphrey. Fancy you not knowing Little Gap. Why, you go 'bout quarter of a mile on the road to Broadwindsor, and then turn off by the big elm, and about five hundred yards on is Little Gap. It's close to the Great Tree — one of the oaks King Charles hid in, or summat."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hansford. And do you know of a pond or anything called 'Silver Pool'?"

"No, Sir Humphrey. That's not near here."

"Ah! thank you. That's all, Mrs. Hansford."

I should like to mention here that Sir Humphrey's kindness and politeness to his menials prove him to be a man of good heart.

When Mrs. Hansford had gone, Sir Humphrey turned to me.

"Well, Conyng, we'll catch him. Catch him with the woman. He's in trouble now: he'll bolt as soon as he can to his Little Gap. I shouldn't be surprised if he went to-night. And we must follow."

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I now come to the part of my story which I had much sooner leave unwritten. I know of course that the common, supernatural explanation of what we saw and underwent is false, because there are no such beings as She claimed to be. But who played tricks with us, and why, I cannot conjecture or discover. I am not surprised at the police's failure to find the woman; but I regret extremely that the Duke of Munster refused to have down a private detective. It is a monstrous thing that a man of Sir Humphrey's position (I do not mention myself) should be the victim of a woman whose character can be none of the best, as she was out unattended in the wilds of Dorset in the early hours of the morning.

Sir Humphrey was, to my surprise, perfectly correct in his surmise that Terence would go out that night. We sat up in my bedroom (which adjoined the boy's) and we heard him go out of his room shortly after midnight. We did not follow until he was out of the house, and then we kept at a distance which made it impossible for him to hear our footsteps. Sir Humphrey, whose establishment was singularly complete, had several pairs of rubber-soled shoes, and we had donned these for our midnight excursion.

Terence seemed particularly light-hearted that night. He went fast and gaily down the road, and he whistled an odd tune which Sir Humphrey informed me was a Nationalist air. He followed the Broadwindsor Road, as Mrs. Hansford had said, and turned off by a large elm, a tree I had noticed before, as it overhung the road at a dangerous angle. Quite suddenly, it seemed to me, he stopped. He was standing near a large oak with the moonlight full upon him, and I heard him give a sigh — a sigh of relief. He was perfectly alone; of this I am positive. His first words were "At last," and then he stood with his face up, and I heard a sound which certainly seemed like that of an embrace. I turned to Sir Humphrey.

He was puzzled and, I'm afraid, angry.

"I believe you're right after all, Conyng, and the boy's just a natural. But he seems quick-witted, doesn't he?"

"He does; but of course he may be defective in one direction only."

"H'sh — he's talking."

Terence was speaking, with his face still up, and his arms in the position of one holding some one else round the body.

"Oh! It was horrid to-day. They've taken my book, and they're reading it. It's beastly, and I don't know what I shall do."

Then came the greatest shock I have ever had.

A voice of very deep quality distinctly said:

"To-night, darling, you shall come to the Other End. And you may stay there. I obtained permission from Them all."

"Oh you dearest — may I? For always?"

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"For always — for our always — and then we will all go together."

"And is it far to the Other End?"

"Not to-night, Terry, not for you. You see how high this end is ——"

Terence looked upward and nodded.

"Well, Other End is twice as far as from the ground to the top-most leaf. Shall we go now?"

"Please, dearest. Carry me!"

Then a singular thing happened. Although Terence was still alone, his body rose in the air and lay in a position which would have been natural had he been in the crook of someone's arm. Nothing visible supported him.

Sir Humphrey spoke again, and his voice sounded a little frightened.

"Conyng, I'm going to stop him. Come on!"

He rushed forward — and I tried to follow. But something stopped us both. A great force pressed against my body. I put my hand up to ward it off, and felt something shaped like a finger, which I could not move. Then as I wrestled, there was a huge clap of thunder, though the sky was perfectly cloudless, and Sir Humphrey, who had been struggling wildly to get forward, fell flat on the ground. The clap was followed by a dazzling brightness which blinded me for the moment. In the actual moment, while my vision swam, I seemed to see the outline of a tall woman, one of whose arms was stretched towards us, while the other encircled Terence. The brightness lasted but a minute, and, when my eyes were used to the night again, the figure had disappeared.

Terence was lying at the foot of the oak, smiling, and Sir Humphrey lay where he fell, his face distorted and his right leg drawn up in an ugly fashion.

That is the true account of Terence Burke's death and Sir Humphrey Burke's paralytic stroke.

The jury at the inquest insisted that Terence died of exhaustion following the floggings given him by his uncle, against whom no proceedings were taken owing to his state of health.

No one else that night heard the clap of thunder or saw the lightning; but no one has explained why there is a pattern of oak leaves all down Sir Humphrey's paralysed arm and leg; or how I acquired on my chest a red mark, in shape like the two fingers of a woman's hand. I believe myself that the whole affair was a gruesome practical joke, worked by some one with an uncanny knowledge of electricity. The country-side, of course, takes the most superstitious view of the matter, and some of the more ignorant and profane even dare to call this deplorable affair a judgment of God.

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The stories and poems of George Paul Elliott have appeared chiefly in "little magazines," of high prestige but limited circulation. We hope, however, that this story, reprinted from "Pacific," will be the first of many Elliott ventures before the wider reading public of science fiction; he possesses, as you'll see, an unusual ability to project thought in fiction, and to assume convincingly an alien mentality with no false anthropomorphic overtones. Our thanks to him for a stimulating item which may be read as allegory, as an intellectual tour de force, or as a pure exercise in imagination.

The Hill

by GEORGE PAUL ELLIOTT

THE blades and their shafts were found by a group of Fighters some distance from the Hill. It seems impossible that they had been there long without having been discovered, yet it is equally impossible to explain their sudden appearance, and as unimportant as inexplicable. They may have been there all the time. I have reason to suspect this now. The blades were quite large, although varying considerably in size, were round, flat, harder than any previously observed substance, and they possessed sharp jagged teeth all around their circumferences. Through the center of each was a small cylindrical shaft. The Great Head ordered these blades transported, no mean feat, to the Hill, and stored. There was no apparent use for them, yet one might be developed.

That Great Head pondered for half his lifetime over these blades and the purpose to which they could be put. Then in a moment of pure intelligence he realized that they could be rotated. It was four generations before the problems of installation and power-transmission were solved, but once these mechanical matters were adjusted it was immediately evident to what use the blades were to be put: arranged at the entrances to our Hill they provided a nearly impregnable defence, the best yet devised. It was a generation later that the concept of inserting the shafts in retractable grooves was developed, so that the blades could be withdrawn for daily use, and protruded into the entrance in case of danger. Indeed, by my time, some 80 generations later, all the engineering problems concerning their maneuvering were effectively solved.

My own contribution, the disastrous one, resulted from a deduction based

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upon an observation of my own together with the memory of an odd event, which has been left in our heritage of knowledge because of its very eccentricity.

I observed that the blades had an unsuspected effect upon the Workers and Fighters. The Workers seemed fascinated by the blades and yet suspicious; they would investigate the entire apparatus time and again, yet when they went through the outlets where the blades were ready to be projected at the smallest sign of danger they always hurried and eyed the dark slot askance. The Fighters, who of course operated the mechanism, liked the thing very much. Yet they showed signs of an odd restlessness now that the Hill was as nearly safe as it could be made. Their function was pre-empted by the blades, in large part, and they were left with much less to do and, perhaps, if they were capable of it, with a consciousness of their decreasing importance. Yet they did not accept any of the Workers' functions, but only stifled their naturally aggressive natures. Twice I found evidence of a Fighter playing with the blades and terrifying the Workers with them. These two were summarily executed of course, but the incipient problem remained. And I noticed furthermore that the Workers devised a system for getting past the slots: they would approach them as if the blades were not there at all, stop with another Worker for a moment of sociability, and then as fast as they were able they dashed across the danger zone. They developed a kind of pride at this feat successfully performed which I am sure was new to them.

I observed these new developments and at the same time I remembered that at one time our food-supply was threatened by a race physically similar to ours but socially totally different. The Workers and Fighters in them were combined into one, and in addition the intelligence of the race was distributed among them all. The result was of course predetermined: our highly specialized Fighters were incomparably their superiors and annihilated them without extraordinary trouble. A few specimens were restrained and observed by the Great Head. They were inferior as Workers to ours, as Fighters to ours, and as intelligences were vastly inferior to our Great Heads. Yet each individual was able to perform all three functions with reasonable adequacy. They did not seem to possess that perfect coordination which is our greatest social accomplishment but rather each individual seemed to be interested primarily in himself and in things *as an individual.* The concept is of course very hard to explain, I can but suggest it in most inadequate terms. But it was observed from their activities and communications that *each considered himself an individual being as much as he considered himself a member of his race.* To be sure, they too had a Great Belly, yet they showed few signs of inexpressible reverence and awe toward their Great Belly as our Workers and Fighters do. Rather they had the intelligent but not immoderate respect toward it that one of our Great Heads displays.

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Now it occurred to me that that strange race, while it erred severely on the side of individualization, yet had a lesson to teach us who erred if at all on the side of specialization of function. And it furthermore occurred to me that I might be able to use the blades to develop both aggressive instincts and intelligence within the Workers, since eugenic methods of improvement were not available to me.

With this in mind I ordered and supervised the secret installation of retractable blades in passageways throughout the Hill. I ordered the Workers who installed these blades executed, and I ordered the Fighters who operated these blades never to reveal their locations. My intention was to shatter the too great security in which our race had so long lived and thereby to develop powers of intelligent resistance to the illogical and unpredictable dangers which now beset them. The operation of the device was simple: as a Worker was walking down a passage, any passage, it couldn't know which, a blade might suddenly course out of the wall and sever it in an instant. The humming of the blades was no warning because its origin was so undefinable. The location of the slots was of no direct help since I had innumerable false slots installed. As a result the Workers could never be sure when danger would descend upon them. There was just enough time-interval between the first appearance of the blade-teeth at the passage wall and its touching the Worker to allow the Worker to escape if it were alert. Otherwise the humming, sharp-toothed blade would surely sunder it.

The results of this innovation abashed my wildest speculations. We Great Heads have grown into the habit of caution in any of our experiments, because our powers of reasoning combined with the huge mass of data and knowledge accumulated over many thousand generations permit us to foretell with precision the results of any experiment. Here however, where so important a part of the data was unavailable to me — that is, the actual nature of the Workers, with whom I have nothing but physical needs in common — I erred considerably in my prognostications. I had expected that the highly developed cautiousness of our Workers would subject them, at first at least, to an excess of timidity when confronted by this new and unpredictable system of dangers; rather, as soon as they understood the principle of the system — and they understood it far far faster than I had any valid reason to expect — they dealt with it in a spirit of pleasure. They seemed actually to enjoy pitting themselves against the new dangers. I had expected, or at any rate I had considered highly possible, a substantial depletion in our stock of Workers by reason of their inability to avoid the dangers of the blades; instead they became so expert at escaping that after the first period of adjustment (which cost us one-fourth of our stock, and we had at one time lost over one-half because of a defective experiment in the food supply) one percent a day were killed by the blades,

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fewer than those executed daily for aberration, a less than negligible number. I had hoped that within my own lifetime I would be able to observe signs, the merest hopeful glints, of increased intelligence and of increased aggressiveness among the Workers, signs that would permit me to hope that within the course of many generations my experiment would have produced its desired result and that I, however anonymously, would have contributed to the advancement of our race. These last two expectations were more than fulfilled.

It took the Workers less than one-third of one of their shorter generations to learn the entire system of dangers! They had memorized completely the scheme, the quite haphazard scheme, by which I had placed the blades. Furthermore, they had gauged to a nicety the individual differences of the blades, the speeds at which they were protruded into the passageways. These speeds varied less than five percent from the norm, according to the size of the blade and to the strength and interest of the Fighter who operated it; yet even these slight variations became a part of the whole system. This latent learning-ability quite frightened me. There had been no presages of it whatsoever. Workers led useful and worthwhile lives — their class was exactly as important as any of the others in our society, of that there could be no question — but these lives had been completely controlled. They worked according to instinct or direction, they tended the Great Belly and the Great Head, in case of danger they fled to their Hill of safety — what more was there? Aberrants were executed — what else? But here, not yet extinct, was the latent power to learn revived within them. Presented with a system of dangers which they and they alone could handle, their only safety now lying within themselves, they provided the abilities to protect themselves. I must confess I am beyond my knowledge in this matter. I must restrict myself for the time to the facts.

First, the Fighters also changed. For the first time for them as well, their function was altered. The mere operation of the blades was a Worker-like function, or at least combined functions of both classes. Then, the killing, or trying to kill, the Workers aroused their (otherwise desirable) aggressiveness, and my having ordered it overcame completely their absolute prohibition from performing any anti-social acts. Consequently, when they observed that the Workers had mastered the system, their task became extremely frustrating; for they now killed only the negligent or inferior specimens. In this completely new situation they too developed reasoning powers; they took to altering the position of their blades. The labor expended by these inexpert workers on so delicate an operation staggers the mind. Yet they accomplished their task.

As a result of the changed position of the blades, within three days one-third of our Worker force had been killed. They were completely baffled by this initial failure of their use of intelligence. The situation was serious, I was forced to issue an order to stop all blade-operations at once. My orders are absolute;

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no Worker or Fighter is able to disobey or to ignore my orders, their instinct would no more permit such a thing than it would permit them to abandon the Great Belly. Therefore, so that they would never receive my orders, the Fighters took to killing every messenger I sent out before it could communicate my message. I went out in person to execute my orders, but when the Fighters became aware of my tedious progress through the large passageways, they ran immediately down the smaller side-tunnels where I could not follow with my enormous head. I retired to my own chamber in a distress of mind which can only be imagined. I saw no way out of the situation, it was as close to mass-disobedience as is conceivable in our society.

That particular emergency spent itself, however, for the Workers learned the new system quite rapidly once they recovered from their confusion.

Then occurs the most unexpected development of all, the most recent in this new twist of things; the Workers begin to plug up all the false slots with building material so that it becomes unnecessary to be for a second uncertain about the blade-system. Should the Fighters change the location of a particular blade, the Workers merely plug the old slot and watch for the new. How revolutionary a step this is, taken as it was without my guidance, it is not easy to overstate. It can only be called an act of intelligence.

I remain within my chamber. True, the Workers feed me as always, and no evidence of changed attitude has come to my attention. But the nearly unlimited possibilities of the situation overwhelm me. I no longer can consider myself capable of controlling the destinies of my race.

What unbearable reactions may this latest development not have upon the already rebellious Fighters? Civil War is unthinkable, yet the Fighters will not put up with this situation forever, of that I am convinced. The neglect of the food supply, the lowered resistance to invaders, the reduction of my position of unchallengeable authority, what more unsuspected sinister repercussions may not result from this anarchy? How to explain the immediate acceptance, the happy yet fearful acceptance, of this murderous system of blades whose purpose they have so seriously perverted? How explain this avoidance of obedience?

The most alarming possibility of all has occurred to me, and I confess that I think it more than probable. Suppose a coalition of the Workers and Fighters should be effected, and they should conclude from their first amazing (but objectively not very large) stride toward intelligence that they no longer needed the guiding authority of the Great Heads. What could I do? They could seal me into my chamber and refuse thereby to receive my orders, which none could disobey so long as the orders did not conflict with instinctual drives. Or they could neglect to nurture a new Great Head when I shall have died. That last possibility seems to me extremely probable, and there is reason to suspect that it has occurred in our previous history. Yet perhaps this occasion differs

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from all previous ones by reason of the increased powers of intelligence throughout the race. Thinking that they could control their own destinies they would continue to develop away from the accepted and proved pattern of our society toward an individualism far far beyond, infinitely beyond, any I had planned, and become in the end an enfeebled race which would capitulate before the first assault of a properly organized enemy.

When I try to understand what went wrong in my calculations, I am again at a loss. I did no more than was my clear-cut duty, I extended knowledge by only the accepted and established methods, I experimented no more dangerously than those before me. I can attribute blame only to the perfection of the society in which I found myself. The presence of the blades was beyond my control, the latent powers of the Workers and Fighters were quite unknown. Had there been other matters pressing me for their attention, I should not have performed the experiment. Yet one of my successors inevitably should have done so, of that there can be no question. The failure then lies within the too perfect society which was developed to serve not only as a system of efficiency and security but also as a camouflage for the actual nature of the race — by no means so simple and perfectible as we Great Heads had thought. The most optimistic view which I can hold on the matter is that after the end of my lineage the Workers and Fighters will come to realize the functionless nature of the blades and will abandon them. I would not have thought this development possible before, since any order of mine has always in the past become as fixed and sure a part of their behavior as the most fundamental instincts, but now I no longer can be sure. Indeed, it is this very compulsory nature of behavior in our society, as though all action resulted from most powerful instinct, which in large measure misled me in my original estimate of the nature of the race. Then after the blades have been abandoned, even dismantled and cast off, they will realize the necessity of Great Heads and will nurture a new lineage as it must have been in the past. But the blades cannot be destroyed, or even eliminated, they will sooner or later be found again and the whole process repeated. Perhaps though they will realize that so perfected a society as ours has been will not need the overwhelming intelligence which my lineage has possessed, and will nurture a secondary line which will be incapable of deducing what I have deduced. Then the intelligence will have been more generally distributed, as I had planned. But I consider this eventuality improbable. Extremely. My only real hope is that somehow my knowledge will survive the coming debacle, and the future intelligences will have learned from my experience the obvious lesson: the nature and condition of the Workers and Fighters can be altered, and should be for the good of the Hill, not in the direction of more but only of less intelligence. Only in complete specialization of function is there security and hope for our race.

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Recommended Reading

by THE EDITORS

IN SURVEYING the books of 1950 we have compiled some shocking statistics on the publishing of the science fiction "novel." (Reasons for using quotes will soon be readily apparent.) During 1950 there were twenty-seven books named — and advertised — by their publishers as "science fiction novels." Of these, seven were original novels, of varying degrees of literary quality, written primarily for book publication. Eight were renditions in book form of magazine serials published within the last ten years. A few of these might have been written with hard cover book editions in mind; judging from obvious rewriting, which usually failed to improve the original version, most of them weren't. Eight were exhumations: serials dug up from the back files of old pulp magazines. Marked by crude writing, out-dated ideas, lack of any importance whatsoever, these dead had for the most part earned an undisturbed rest! Three of the twenty-seven were collections of short stories or novelets which were dubbed *novels*. One publisher capitalized on the "flying saucer" craze to give an otherwise agreeable science-fictional spy thriller a title that had nothing to do with the book itself. Another labeled the adventures of a character long renowned in fantasy-adventure as "science-fantasy." If "legendary *magic*" is science . . . oh, well. And the situation is perhaps even worse in the 25¢ paperbacks not included in this study.

If publishers of science fiction "novels" are operating solely for that small group of fanatic collectors who will buy anything between covers, hard or soft, the foregoing is of no interest save to an equally small group of purists. But if these publishers want to reach an audience as large as, say, that of the mystery novel — and they should, if only for financial reasons — then we submit it's high time that they set up a few simple standards of honest publishing.

Certainly, the present situation represents the rankest kind of opportunism, resulting in the promotion and sale of shoddy merchandise to the helpless reader. (He, poor wight, is outside the protection of the Federal Trade Commission which has no authority over the labeling of books.) Equally helpless are too many talented young writers who'd like to write books, if publishers would cease looking backward at the dated efforts of current "names" they can seemingly reprint very cheaply. It's odd that one publishing house, noted for its development of young mystery writers, has published not one new effort on its science fiction list!

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However, these never-despairing reviewers have, without too much difficulty, found a few bright spots in the picture. Under the able editorship of Groff Conklin, Grosset & Dunlap has launched a line of dollar reprints called *Science Fiction Classics*. Mr. Conklin's first four selections are excellent, headed — paradoxically — by the first book appearance of Henry Kuttner's FURY, followed close after by THE ISLAND OF CAPTAIN SPARROW, by S. Fowler Wright, Jack Williamson's THE HUMANOIDS and THE WORLD OF Ā, by A. E. Van Vogt. Two books published as juveniles that will delight the adult reader are: FARMER GILES OF HAM, by J. R. R. Tolkien (remember THE HOBBIT?), with wondrous illustrations by Pauline Diana Baynes (Houghton); and THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE, by C. S. Lewis (Macmillan). And to show that we object to the resurrection men only when they revive bodies better left interred, we especially recommend Prime Press's fine work in rediscovering Mary Griffith's THREE HUNDRED YEARS HENCE (1836); the exquisite job of bookmaking — at a phenomenally low price — Doric Books did on their reprint of W. H. Hudson's THE CRYSTAL AGE (1887); and Frederick Fell's reissue, bolstered by a sound Fletcher Pratt analysis, of Hugo Gernsback's scientifically (if hardly fictionally) significant RALPH 124C41+ (1912).

And now, before we turn to the "best of the year," we can say that if the books discussed in the first three paragraphs were unrelieved by any creative publishing at all, 1950 would still have been a noteworthy year in science fiction, if only for the publication of Dover's one volume edition of SEVEN SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS OF H. G. WELLS. It contains all of the Old Master's works that are now classics, such as THE TIME MACHINE, THE INVISIBLE MAN, THE WAR OF THE WORLDS, etc., etc. and is a must for all readers!

So, with chest relieved of gripes and with malice toward quite a few, we offer our checklist of the best works of imaginative fiction published in 1950. Titles are listed alphabetically by author. We feel that every book belongs in every collection of imaginative literature.

Charles Addams: MONSTER RALLY (Simon & Schuster). Like Lovecraft's Richard Upton Pickman, Addams obviously "was born in strange shadow" and has "found a way to unlock the forbidden gate." Here are the latest results of his eldritch and unhallowed researches, with especial emphasis on that accursed household of clearly transplanted Arkhamites in Suburbia.

Everett F. Bleiler & T. E. Dikty, editors: THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORIES: 1950 (Fell). The annually indispensable collection.

Ray Bradbury: THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES (Doubleday). Despite the justified protests of purists that this is not really science fiction, Bradbury manages,

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through what Christopher Isherwood calls his "very great and unusual talent," to achieve a poet's interpretation of future history beyond the limits of any fictional form.

Elizabeth Cadell: BRIMSTONE IN THE GARDEN (Morrow). A singularly delightful blend of demonic fantasy elements with the British satiric light novel.

August Derleth, editor: BEYOND TIME & SPACE (Pellegrini & Cudahy). An unusually valuable historical survey of the beginnings of science fiction leading up to a contemporary selection, all chosen with characteristic Derleth taste.

Basil Davenport, editor: GHOSTLY TALES TO BE TOLD (Dodd, Mead). An anthology distinguished by intelligently informative notes, by an impeccable selection of the finest (if also largely the most familiar) tales of pure horror, and above all by the editor's plea for the integration of modern stories into oral folklore — with suggestions on how *you* can do it.

Martin Greenberg, editor: MEN AGAINST THE STARS (Gnome). Another tasteful anthology, especially notable for its skillful pattern of studying step-by-step man's future progress.

Robert A. Heinlein: WALDO AND MAGIC, INC. (Doubleday). Two novelets, one science fiction and one supernatural, equally displaying the author's skill in blending logical thought with fiction.

Robert A. Heinlein: THE MAN WHO SOLD THE MOON (Shasta). The first volume in the collected Heinlein Future History, and thereby indispensable to the smallest basic science fiction library.

Donald Keyhoe: THE FLYING SAUCERS ARE REAL (Fawcett). An intelligent paperback original (non-fiction), based on detailed personal research and legwork; no more sensational than its important subject imposes — and infinitely preferable to the arrant nonsense in hard covers which keeps soaring on the bestseller lists.

Fritz Leiber: GATHER, DARKNESS! (Pellegrini & Cudahy). One of the most powerfully imaginative magazine science fiction novels of eight years ago seems even more impressive in its book debut among the current crop.

Eric Linklater: A SPELL FOR OLD BONES (Macmillan). Odd blend of light wit and a certain epic grandeur in this legend of giants in pre-Arthurian Britain.

Helen McCloy: THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY (Random). The Doppelgänger theme eerily treated in a precise balance between the detective story and the science-fantasy.

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Judith Merril: SHADOW ON THE HEARTH (Doubleday). Possibly the first *new* approach to science fiction in a decade, in this moving small-scale study of the domestic impact of atomic war.

Judith Merril, editor: SHOT IN THE DARK (Bantam). As good value for the money (25¢) as any anthology in the field has offered — and an ideally tasteful item for converting the unindoctrinated.

A. N. L. Munby: THE ALABASTER HAND (Macmillan). Quietly terrifying modernizations of the M. R. James tradition — the season's best offering to the admirer of a literate conventional ghost story.

Lewis Padgett: A GNOME THERE WAS (Simon & Schuster). Only the devout who know every word of Padgett-Kuttner will complain that this is not an ideal selection of his best; others will find it as stimulating and entertaining a blend of magazine fantasy and science fiction as has appeared since the collected Sturgeon.

Theodore Sturgeon: THE DREAMING JEWELS (Greenberg). And speaking of Sturgeon, here is the Young Master at last in a full-length effort — skilled and delightful imaginative creation (in purest fantasy though published as science fiction).

James Thurber: THE 13 CLOCKS (Simon & Schuster). The formal fairy-tale theme of the enchanted princess and the minstrel-prince, magically adorned with touches of modern humor, hints of dark Jacobean terror, and gleams of pure poetry.

Anthony West: THE VINTAGE (Houghton Mifflin). Highly successful use of a strict logical-fantasy form in a serious novel probing the spiritual sickness of twentieth century man.

Charles Williams: THE GREATER TRUMPS (Pellegrini & Cudahy). A tremendously glowing and exciting book, one of Williams' finest, alive both as theological allegory and as pure fantasy.

S. Fowler Wright: THE THRONE OF SATURN (Arkham). First American collection of the short stories of a master in the use of science fiction as sociological satire.

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In these days of nervous tensions, neuroses, engrams, complexes et altera, ad nauseam, we feel that it is our solemn duty to reprint Alan Nelson's detailed study of the "emergence of a new psychosis," which first appeared in that stimulating California regional magazine, "What's Doing" (now reborn as "Game and Gossip"). If a guffaw a day keeps the psychiatrist at bay, then the public must *know the pathetic case history of Mr. McFarlane, the poor fellow who suffered from delusions of beneficence! Even sadder is the fate of that pioneer, Dr. Departure, who sought most earnestly to classify Mr. McFarlane's strange new type of mental disorder.*

Narapoia

by ALAN NELSON

"I DON'T KNOW EXACTLY how to explain it to you, Doctor," the young man began. He smoothed back his slick black hair that shone like a phonograph record and blinked his baby blue eyes. "It seems to be the opposite of a persecution complex."

Dr. Manly J. Departure was a short severe man who made a point of never exhibiting surprise. "The opposite of a persecution complex?" he said, permitting one eyebrow to elevate. "How do you mean — the opposite of a persecution complex, Mr. McFarlane?"

"Well, for one thing, I keep thinking that I'm following someone." McFarlane sat placidly in the big easy chair, hands folded, pink cheeks glowing, the picture of health and tranquility. Dr. Departure stirred uneasily.

"You mean you think someone is following *you*, don't you?" the doctor corrected.

"No. No, I don't! I mean that while I'm walking along the street, suddenly I have this feeling there is somebody just ahead of me. Somebody I'm after. Someone I'm following. Sometimes I even begin to run to catch up with him! Of course — there's no one there. It's inconvenient. Damned inconvenient. And I hate to run."

Dr. Departure fiddled with a pencil. "I see. Is there anything else?"

"Well, yes. I keep having this feeling that people . . . that people . . . well, it's really very silly, but . . ."

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"It's quite all right," Dr. Departure purred. "Feel free to tell me anything."

"Well, I keep having this strange feeling that people are plotting to do me good. That they're trying to be benevolent and kind toward me. I don't know exactly who they are, or why they wish me all this kindness, but . . . it's all very fantastic, isn't it?"

It had been a long hard day for Dr. Departure. Somehow he did not feel up to any more symptoms. He busied himself the rest of the hour obtaining factual background. McFarlane was 32; happily married; healthy, normal childhood; satisfactorily employed as a radio repairman; no physical complaints; no bad dreams; no drinking; no history of parental discord; no financial worries. Nothing.

"Shall we say Thursday at eleven, then?" he smiled, ushering McFarlane out.

At ten minutes to ten on Thursday, Dr. Departure looked at his appointment book and frowned. Well, maybe he wouldn't show up. Very often that happened. He certainly hoped that this would be one of the occasions. Opposite of a persecution complex! Delusions of beneficence! Indeed! The man must be . . . he checked himself hastily. He'd almost said 'mad.' At that moment the door buzzer sounded and McFarlane was grinning and shaking his hand.

"Well, well." Dr. Departure's affability seemed somewhat hollow. "Any new developments?"

"Seems to me I'm getting worse," McFarlane beamed. "This business of following someone, I mean. Yes sir. Yesterday, I must have walked five miles!"

Dr. Departure relaxed into his chair across the desk.

"Well, now, suppose you tell me more about it. *All* about it. Just *anything* that comes to mind."

McFarlane frowned.

"What do you mean, Doctor, just anything that comes to mind?"

"Just ramble on — about anything — whatever comes into your head."

"I'm not sure I understand. Could you show me what you mean, Doctor? Just by way of illustration?"

The doctor permitted himself a little chuckle.

"Why, it's very simple . . . Well . . . like right now I'm thinking how one time I stole some money out of Mother's purse . . . and now I'm thinking about my wife, wondering what to get her for our wedding anniversary . . ." The doctor looked up hopefully. "See? Just anything like that."

"Anything like what? I still don't quite understand." But McFarlane's face was not puzzled; it was eager. "Could you give me just a couple more illustrations? They're very interesting."

The doctor found himself relating disconnected, half-forgotten images. McFarlane sat back with a strangely contented expression.

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At the end of the hour, Dr. Departure was quite exhausted. His voice was hoarse; his collar and tie askew. ". . . and well, my wife — she completely dominates me . . . I always was very sensitive that my eyes are slightly crossed . . . I never will forget — that time in the attic, with the little girl across the street . . . I was only eleven I guess . . ." Reluctantly, he broke off, wiped his eyes and glanced at his watch.

"I feel much better," he heard McFarlane say. "Shall we say Tuesday at ten?"

Next Tuesday at ten, Dr. Departure inwardly braced himself.

"There'll be no more nonsense like last Thursday's session," he assured himself, but he had no cause for concern. McFarlane was strangely silent and preoccupied. He carried a large cardboard box, which he carefully set upon the floor before seating himself in the leather chair. The doctor prodded him with a few preliminary questions.

"I'm afraid I'm beginning to be troubled with hallucinations, Doctor," McFarlane finally volunteered.

Dr. Departure mentally rubbed his hands. He was back on old familiar territory now. He felt more comfortable.

"Ah, hallucinations!"

"Rather, they're not really hallucinations, Doctor. You might say they were the *opposite* of hallucinations."

Dr. Departure rested his eyes a moment. The smile disappeared from his face. McFarlane continued:

"Last night, for instance, Doctor, I had a nightmare. Dreamed there was a big ugly bird perched on my short-wave set waiting for me to wake up. It was a hideous thing — a fat bulbous body and a huge beak that turned upward like a sickle. Blood-shot eyes with pouches under them. And ears, Doctor. Ears! Did you ever hear of a bird with ears? Little tiny, floppy ears, something like a cocker spaniel's. Well, I woke up, my heart pounding, and what do you think? There actually *was* an ugly fat bird with ears sitting on the short-wave set."

Dr. Departure perked up again. A very simple case of confusing the real with the unreal. Traditional. Almost classical.

"A real bird on the short-wave set?" he asked gently. "With blood-shot eyes?"

"Yes," McFarlane replied. "I know it sounds silly. I know it's hard to believe."

"Oh, not at all. Not at all. That type of visual aberration is a common enough phenomenon." The doctor smiled soothingly. "Nothing to . . ."

McFarlane interrupted him by reaching down and hoisting the carton onto the desk. "You don't understand, Doctor," he said. "Go ahead. Open it."

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The doctor looked at McFarlane a moment, then at the brown box which was punctured with air holes and tied with heavy twine. Disconcertedly, the doctor cut the string and folded back the top flaps. He leaned over and peered in — then sucked in his breath. Pouchy, blood-shot eyes leered up at him. Floppy ears. The up-side-down beak. An obscene-looking bird.

"His name is Lafayette," McFarlane said, tossing a few bread crumbs into the carton which were quickly devoured with a noisy, repulsive gulp. "He rather grows on you after awhile, don't you think?"

After McFarlane left with his hallucination, the doctor sat a few moments meditating. He felt a little dizzy and lightheaded as though he had just emerged from a ride through the Tunnel of Horrors at the beach.

Maybe I *am* witnessing an entirely new psychosis, he told himself. Funny things are happening in the world today. He saw himself before the American Psychiatric Congress delivering a monograph: "The Emergence of a New Psychosis". This new disorder apparently had symptoms opposite from Paranoia — he could call it Narapoia. Hopefully, Dr. Departure foresaw the possibility that some of his colleagues would insist on naming it after its discoverer: "Departureomania". He would be famous; his name linked with Freud. A sickening thought struck him. Supposing this man McFarlane were a malingerer! A fake! By God, he'd find out! Quickly, he buzzed his secretary, Miss Armstrong, and instructed her to cancel all appointments for the rest of the day. Then he reached for his hat and fled from the building.

Three days later the telephone in Dr. Departure's office rang. Miss Armstrong answered it. It was Mrs. Departure.

"No, he isn't here," Miss Armstrong said. "As a matter of fact he hasn't been here for three days except to bounce in and out for his mail."

"I don't know what's the matter with that man." Mrs. Departure's exasperated voice rattled the receiver. "He's gone half the night, too. Comes home utterly exhausted. What do you suppose he's writing in that little notebook?"

"Frankly, I'm worried about him," Miss Armstrong replied. "He's so irritable. And in such a frightful rush all the time."

"You're looking peaked, Doc," McFarlane said, at his next meeting a week later. It was the first time the doctor had sat behind the desk for many days. His legs ached. Stealthily, beneath the desk, he slipped off both scuffed shoes to relieve the pressure from his blistered feet.

"Never mind about me," the doctor snapped. "How are *you*?" The doctor's fingers twitched. He was much thinner and his face was pale and drawn.

"I think I must be getting better," McFarlane announced. "I have the feeling lately that someone is following *me*."

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"Nonsense!" Dr. Departure snapped at him irritably. "It's just your imagination." He squinted his eyes and gazed at McFarlane. If only he could be sure this McFarlane was not faking. So far there was nothing to indicate he was. After all, his sudden urge on the streets to overtake someone seemed perfectly genuine. McFarlane would raise his head, his pace would quicken, and away he would go. "Well, I'll just have to watch him a little while longer," the doctor told himself. He closed his eyes a moment, reviewing his activities for the previous week: the long cross-city jaunts in which he had almost lost McFarlane a dozen times; the long, long waits outside restaurants and bars waiting for McFarlane to emerge. "I'll just have to keep going until I get all the facts," he thought. But he was a little concerned with the weight he'd lost, and with the strange ringing noises in his head which had recently developed. . . .

At the end of the hour, McFarlane tiptoed out of the office. Dr. Departure was snoring fuzzily.

On the day of McFarlane's next appointment with the doctor, he was met at the door by Miss Armstrong. "Doctor isn't here," she informed him. "He's taken a leave of absence for three months — possibly a year."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear it," McFarlane said. "He *was* looking done in, though. Where is he, on vacation?"

"As a matter of fact, he's at Marwood Sanitarium."

A strange puzzled look suddenly settled over McFarlane's face and he gazed into space a moment. Presently, he smiled at the secretary.

"I just had the funniest feeling," he said. "Suddenly I feel like I'm completely cured. All of a sudden. Just when you told me about Dr. Departure."

The doctors had quite a time with Dr. Departure at the sanitarium.

"Just tell us anything that comes into your mind," they urged. Departure's eyes were glazed and he was very excited.

"I've got to follow him, I tell you! I can't let him get out of sight. Not for an instant. He's got a bird with baggy eyes and floppy ears."

"Very interesting. *All* very interesting!" The doctors gloomed among themselves, shaking their heads scientifically:

"Something entirely new!"

"It's rather like a persecution complex — isn't it? — only the opposite!"

"He seems to have the delusion he is following someone. Amazing, isn't it?"

"Probably the emergence of a brand new psychosis. I suggest that we observe him very closely."

And here one of the doctors went so far as to suggest further that they allow Dr. Departure to move about the city at will — closely watched, of course, by alternately selected members of their staff — so that all his actions could be carefully noted. . . .

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In those grim days when our bloody Civil War was nearing its end and General Lee was planning to evacuate Richmond, legend has it that a wagon-load of gold was shipped out of the Confederate capital. This gold, both coin and bullion, disappeared somewhere along its journey southward, to pass into myth and folk tale. But the legend lives on as strongly as any other memory of the Lost Cause and even today, treasure hunters are stalking the lost wealth. Manly Wade Wellman, both a brilliant fantasy writer and an able historian of the Confederacy, in this chilling piece of Americana offers these seekers a clue to the gold's present whereabouts. A clue — and a frightful warning to seek no more! Query to our readers: Do any of you know the origin of the word "larroes"? Though the phrase which furnishes this story's title is in general use in many parts of the country, neither Mr. Webster nor Mr. Mencken mentions it. Both we and Mr. Wellman would appreciate any data you can offer.

Larroes Catch Meddlers

by MANLY WADE WELLMAN

THE WOODS were thick and damp, swampy underfoot and woven through with stealthy little noises, and under the branches the darkness of night seemed thickened and concentrated. Here, at the edge of the last belt of jack-oaks both men paused, gazing into the dim-silvery wash of moonlight that fell around the jagged silhouette of the lonely old house in the open.

Purdy hunched his thick shoulders inside his denim jumper, as though to make his big body smaller, smaller even than Crofton's. "Tell me all that there stuff over again," he begged in a half whisper. "About the half million dollars worth of gold."

"I read you like a book, Purdy," muttered Crofton, sourly scornful. "You need the smell of money to prop you up. You're still scared to make yourself rich on a dark night."

A cloud drifted over what moon there was and stayed there for seconds.

"Tell me about it again," repeated Purdy. "I just wanted to get it straight."

"All right." Crofton sounded like a disgusted adult yielding to the importunities of a stupid child. "It's what was left from the treasury of the Confederate States of America. A ton of gold. All the truck yonder can carry." He gestured to where, at the head of the bumpy path through the woods, stood the

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battered pickup truck they had coaxed through the dark without headlights.

"A ton," repeated Purdy, as raptly as though he prayed.

"Jefferson Davis and his cabinet and family ran away from Richmond in April, 1865," Crofton ill-humoredly rehearsed the story once again. "They had wagons to carry the treasury funds, and there were sixty naval cadets to guard them, commanded by a naval captain named William Parker. They didn't bother to bring any Confederate paper money, it was already worthless. The wagons carried some silver, a hundred thousand dollars or so, and that was drawn to pay Davis' cavalry escort. The party got as far as Washington, Georgia, before it split up. Parker crossed his wagons and cadet detail back into South Carolina. He unloaded the gold in a warehouse at Abbeville. He drew forty dollars apiece for the sixty cadets and told them to scatter and go home. The rest of the gold was never heard of again."

"A ton of it." Purdy plainly loved the word.

"American double eagles," elaborated Crofton. "Mexican and English and other foreign money. Likewise nuggets and bars. Nobody ever got it."

"That's hard to believe, Crofton."

"Abbeville was stiff with Confederate bomb-proofs and deserters and stragglers who hoped to steal some of that gold in the warehouse," Crofton told him. "But up came the Federal troops, and drove them away. The Federals never got it either, though they'd heard of it — it was reported as high as thirteen million dollars in value. It vanished from the warehouse. Somebody carried it up from Abbeville to this part of the country."

"To that old house yonder," said Purdy, still rapt.

"Yes, that old house yonder. Larroes."

"Larroes," echoed Purdy, straining his eyes in the night. "You wouldn't know about that, Crofton, without I'd told you."

"Don't keep saying you told me," Crofton scolded him. "For years I've combed the Southern states, on the trail of clues to that Confederate treasury gold. All you contributed was that old family tale of yours, and half of that is superstitious guff. More than half. It wouldn't add up for a moment unless I knew everything else to go with it."

"I gave you the tale as it was give to me," Purdy said plaintively. He was timid in the darkness, in the presence of the smaller, sharper-tongued, more resolute Crofton. "My daddy got it from his daddy. They said two Confederate officers came to Larroes with something worth a lot —"

"There you are," broke in Crofton, half accusingly. "Something worth a lot. They never said it was the gold. I tied it in with what I know."

"Them two officers stored the stuff in the cellar," Purdy continued his share of the story. "The Larro family was in cahoots with them, part ways. And there was somebody who passed an old-time hoodoo spell —"

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"Voodoo spell, you ignorant ape."

"No sir, it's hoodoo spell. Not voodoo, only kind of an alikely sound. Then in a few days the Yankees burned the house, like they burned most of the big houses here around, and later the Larro folks built another house on top of the foundations, without taking out what was shut up down there. And nobody's dared go look, though Larroes has standed unlived in since ever I remember."

"Well, I dare go look," said Crofton, "and don't stand there making silly faces. You're going with me."

"I just keep remembering that hoodoo charm account," said Purdy.

"Well, remember the half million dollars. A ton of gold. Lots of the coins worth much more than their face value to numismatists."

"To what?"

"Coin collectors, yokel. Now forget that voodoo or hoodoo or whatever you want to call it."

"Hoodoo," said Purdy. "No, sir, I won't forget it, I'll remember it. That's why I got this here glory hand." He fumbled in his breast pocket.

"Don't show me that spare part for a mummy again!" Crofton warned him.

"Just wanted to be sure I hadn't lost it," said Purdy. "I got it from old Mrs. Peddicoe. Costed me nine dollars. She cut it off Lew Barr when them night riders lynched him year before last."

"Leave it in your pocket," said Crofton.

"Well, you ain't doing everything about this job," Purdy insisted. "The glory hand is goin' to give us a way to that treasure."

"Use it whatever way you think it'll help. Come on. Never mind the truck, first we'll see how we get in there."

Crofton put a hand into his own pocket, touched the short-barrelled revolver he carried, and picked his way out into the open, along a weed-grown path down a gentle moonlit slope toward the quiet old house called Larroes.

As he groped along, Crofton mentally cursed his big, stupid partner for cowering before a dimly-remembered legend of rural magic; Purdy had communicated a sense of extra uneasiness to Crofton himself. Hoodoo . . . so Southern country people still feared things like that. Yet, if fear had guarded the treasure for so many years, if the treasure was here where it must be, as Crofton's money-hungry research insisted it must be . . . well, they'd have it. Maybe even Purdy's glory hand might help get it. Crofton felt magnanimous as he granted some possible trifle of power to the thing. At dawn tomorrow he'd sneer at Purdy's terrors, and bully him into taking less than a half share.

"Larroes is a pure funny name," ventured Purdy, tramping behind. "Never knew what for a sort of name it was. Maybe foreigner."

"You said the name was Larro, not Larroes," reminded Crofton. "What's the difference? No Larro has lived here for fifty years."

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" 'Larroes catch meddlers,' " quoted Purdy softly. "The old folks used to say that when we was chaps, to keep us from playing 'round that old house."

Crofton cleared his throat over a grating laugh. "Larroes catch meddlers? That's an old saying everywhere, not just here around Larroes. I don't know what it means. Maybe it can be treed in some old quotation collection, or in Mencken's *American Language* book. I'm not worrying about it right now."

"Larroes catch meddlers," said Purdy again. "Names mean something. I heared once that Purdy was an old French name, means getting lost."

"*Perdu*," supplied Crofton. "I'll keep you from getting lost."

"Glad we got the glory hand, anyway," said Purdy.

They were in the yard, among shadow-clotted old trees, rank of foliage. Their feet crunched the gravel of an untended path. Crofton approached the saggy big porch of the house, Purdy at his heels. Crofton heard the big man's worried, heavy breathing.

"Come on," said Crofton, and mounted the rickety planks. He saw the door, dimly sketched among the shadows cast by the ruined roof. Its glass pane was shattered. Crofton took hold of the knob, and the door yielded to his push with a slow, weary creak of rusty hinges. Stepping inside, he produced his flashlight from his other side pocket. Purdy entered behind him.

"Who's there?" croaked a voice, as rusty as the hinges.

Purdy squealed and darted out again, swift as a lizard for all his clumsy bulk. Crofton sprang against the wall inside the door. His right hand drew the revolver, his left snapped on the flashlight and stabbed its beam around.

"What are you doing in my house?" croaked the voice.

Crofton's light momentarily touched a face. It was pale, fringed with fluffy white hair and centered with two black eyes like ripe watermelon seeds. The face dodged out of the light, and Crofton probed for it again.

"Stay where you are," he cried shrilly, "or I'll shoot."

Again he trapped the face with his light, in a corner of a big, black room. He walked toward it. The black eyes hooded themselves in crinkled lids, a white hand lifted as though to gesture the blinding glare away.

"You're trespassing here," mildly accused the face.

Crofton saw a stooped shred of a man, in nondescript rags of garments. Long white hair banged the brow, the mouth and chin sprouted a heavy white beard. The pale face had deep, tight wrinkles, the narrow shoulders drooped beneath a burden of age.

"Who are you?" challenged Crofton.

"My name is Larro."

"That's a lie," Crofton growled. "There haven't been any Larro people here for decades."

"I have come back. I want to be alone here, quiet. What do you want?"

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"Purdy!" yelled Crofton over his shoulder. "Come back in, it's all right. Nobody here but an old tramp."

"I'm not a tramp," gently argued the old man who called himself Larro. "I own Larroes. You're trespassing."

"I've got a gun." Crofton thrust it into the light of his flash. "Don't argue or try to run, or I'll shoot you."

"Very well." Larro seemed to grant the point for the sake of peace. "But what is it you want?"

Purdy came in, slowly and furtively. "Know this old rooster?" Crofton asked him.

Purdy looked. The whites of his eyes reflected the light. "No, sir," said Purdy, "never saw him in my life."

"I've been away so long," said Larro. "And I haven't shown myself to anyone hereabouts. I'm old. I just want to die here." His thin hand stroked his beard. "Once more, in all patience, what do you want?"

"Half a million dollars in gold," replied Crofton.

Larro sank noiselessly into an old chair. "Oh, you know about that."

"Hear that, Purdy?" cried Crofton in triumph. To Larro he said, "Yes, I know all about it. And I want it."

"You won't get it, sir," said Larro gently. "How did you learn?"

"From American history. I took off from the point where the Confederate treasury disappeared and I've researched all the way to here." Crofton spoke with proud awareness of his own wit and industry. "And Purdy here supplied the old ghost story about this tumbledown house. I've winnowed his bushel of superstition down to the grain of truth. The gold's down cellar, under us."

"But you won't get it," said Larro, stroking his beard again.

Crofton laughed, dangerously mocking. "You think you can scare us with Purdy's hoodoo tale?"

"I'll leave you to find out for yourself."

"Tie him up," Crofton bade Purdy.

The big man produced a doubled hank of cord. Quickly he tied the small, unresisting old figure to the chair. Crofton turned his flash into Larro's face.

"Listen to me," he commanded. "You really came here to get that gold yourself, didn't you?"

"I wouldn't touch it," said Larro with the same gentle insistence. "It isn't mine. It isn't yours. I haven't long to live, anyway. And the gold belongs to the Confederate States of America."

"There aren't any Confederate States of America."

"That's why no one can have the money," said Larro. "It belongs to nobody."

Purdy gazed at Larro and breathed heavily. He was nervous.

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"Listen, Purdy," said Crofton, "get back to the truck. Drive it as close up to the front door as you can get. Don't use anything but the parking lights."

Purdy left, plainly glad of the chance. Alone with Larro, with the darkness close around his flashlight beam, Crofton permitted himself another ugly laugh.

"You know how to find that money in the cellar?"

"The cellar's closed up." Larro might have been any serene old man politely answering questions for an interview. "My father, the last of the Larro brothers who owned the older house, built this second one on the foundations of the first. He left no cellar door."

Crofton quartered the floor with his beam. Dark broad squares of stone fitted together, with cracks as narrow as the strokes of a fine-pointed pen. He stamped. The floor sounded as solid as a paved street.

"All right," he said, "what the hell else do you know? What's this story about the hoodoo man who bewitched the treasure?"

"My uncles," said Larro, "brought upon themselves the spell you mention."

"Brought it on themselves?"

"They're down below us with the gold."

"Come off that!"

"You ask for the truth. My uncles were Major Micah Larro and Captain Nelson Larro. They brought the wagons with the treasure this far, and by then Jefferson Davis was captured and the last Confederate army had surrendered. In June, 1865, they proved themselves true to their lost country. They went to the cellar with the gold, said certain words that would shut it in there."

"And shut themselves in with it?" snarled Crofton.

"The door never opened to release them. They remain on guard."

"Fairy story!"

"No. My father was only a boy, but he remembered. He told me. He never lied in his life."

"Then you learned the habit somewhere else." Crofton shoved the gun muzzle into Larro's beard. "Where's the cellar door?"

"I've said that there is no cellar door."

Turning, Crofton walked across the floor, examining it by flashlight. There was no opening or indication of one. The floor sounded as solid as pavement under his pacing feet. "I'll make you show me," he said to Larro at last.

Larro sat relaxed in his bonds. "My good fool, I came here — poor, friendless, weary, full of years — to die quietly in my old home. Hasten my dying process if you like, but I've told you the truth."

The truck rattled up outside. Then Purdy tramped in.

"I'm goin' to —" said Purdy, then broke off and struck a match.

Crofton watched. Purdy held something and touched the flame to it. For a moment the something looked like a twisted stub of root, with suckers at-

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tached. One of the protruding spikes ignited, then another and another — five. Purdy brought the light closer. Its several flames glared more brightly, Crofton fancied, than the flashlight.

"Like I said, I got it from old Mrs. Peddicoe," said Purdy. "She cut it off Lew Barr when they hung him, them night riders. Costed me nine —"

"Ah," said Larro appreciatively, "a hand of glory."

A sudden rank stench made Crofton wrinkle his nose. "Keep that thing from reeking in my face," he snapped.

"I think it must be one of the oldest of charms," contributed Larro. "A hand severed from a man who died by hanging, specially treated with its own fat so that the fingers serve as a sheaf of candles. By its light, one opens concealed ways, finds hidden valuables —"

"Get rid of it!" Crofton snatched at the thing, but Purdy held it out of his reach.

"Don't mess with my glory hand, now," argued Purdy, suddenly stubborn. "Old Mrs. Peddicoe swore it would work. Let it alone, and let's go down cellar."

He pointed to an opposite corner, and Crofton looked. In the light from the five burning fingers he saw what he must have overlooked.

A whole section of the floor was flung upward and back against the wall, like a hatchway, with open blackness exposed beneath.

"So you did lie about the cellar door," Crofton accused Larro.

"It opened when I lit this glory hand," said Purdy.

"He is right," said Larro. "You see, there is something in what you call *superstition*."

Crofton did not reply. He had run to the hole and was exploring its depths with the beam of his flashlight. Purdy followed him, lifting the blazing hand. The rank smell assailed Crofton's nose again, but the fivefold glare seemed to help the electric beam. Crofton saw stone steps, older and darker than the squares of the floor.

"Here we go," he said to Purdy, and descended carefully.

The air of the cellar lay heavy around and upon him, like a quiet cloud of dust. He was in a rectangular chamber with walls of rough old brick, a floor of flat, dry dirt. Almost at the foot of the steps huddled a pile of chests or trunks, dark and grubby. Beyond these stood something, stood two somethings.

Crofton levelled his ready pistol.

"Hands up!" he roared.

The two shapes stood as silent as hall trees.

Purdy was with him. Crofton could tell by the odor of Purdy's lights. The beams struck past Crofton, and he could see gray jackets, broad hats, faces as stiffly immobile as the carved faces of statues.

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"Them's just dead folks," chattered Purdy.

"They are my uncles," came the muffled voice of Larro from above the stairs. "My uncles Micah and Nelson."

Gun poised, flashlight at waist level, Crofton moved around the stack of chests and confronted the nearest shape.

"This one's dead, all right," Crofton said to Purdy.

He examined the figure at close range. It was lean, of medium height, with long brown hair and a spike of tawny beard on the wood-stiff chin. It wore a snug gray jacket, buttoned back on either side from a tight vest and a black cravat. On the sleeve of each arm showed a tracery of gold braid. Gray pants with yellow stripes at the seams were stuck into black riding boots. A leather belt supported a long sheathed saber with a heavy curved guard of brass.

"Dead," said Crofton again.

"Look!" gasped Purdy. "Them beards! They're trimmed, neat-like. They ain't growed . . . like hair does on 'em when they're dead!"

"You *are* a fool," snapped Crofton. "Don't you know that's damned rare? Doesn't happen once in a thousand times!"

But Purdy came no closer. Crofton nudged a body's flank with his revolver. It was like prodding a tree trunk. Toward him stared eyes as bright and empty as fragments of stained glass. The hair looked rigid, like masses of fine wire.

"They got swords," said Purdy. "Old-time Confederate swords."

He moved toward the other figure, heavier bearded and a thought slimmer, but otherwise the twin of the one Crofton examined. Purdy caught the hilt of the second figure's sword and tugged. It did not stir in the sheath. Then Purdy straightened, his five-fingered light almost under the nose of the figure.

"Hark at that old man!" said Purdy.

"Uncle Nelson, Uncle Micah!" Larro was calling from the room above. "Isn't it time that the cellar should be closed again?"

Purdy sprang clear of the bearded shape with a stammered oath.

"What's the matter with you?" growled Crofton.

"That there dead fellow took and blowed out my glory hand," Purdy quavered.

The hand flared no more. Crofton moved away from the figure he confronted. He felt cold of hand and foot and brow.

"Nonsense!" he said. "A puff of wind."

"Ain't no wind down here," argued Purdy. He was groping in his pockets. "Where's a match?"

"Never mind that stinking thing of yours now. We came here after gold."

As Crofton spoke, he was back at the chests. He put away his gun and lifted a reluctant lid. Dust slid from it as he tilted it back. In one hand he gathered a palmful of the great heap of metal disks that gleamed dully inside.

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"Hey," Purdy said as he joined Crofton, "what's happened to them stairs? They ain't there no more."

Crofton held out his palmful. It clinked. "Gold!" he said again.

"Is all them trunks full?" said Purdy. "They'll make all the load our truck will carry. Let's hustle them out of here. Where's the stairs, Crofton?"

"First of all," said Crofton, "we'll do our friend Larro a favor. Shoot him dead. Come up with me." He took a step toward the stairs.

There were no stairs. The wall of brick, ancient but solid, faced him.

"They're gone!" Purdy yammered. "Where's them stairs?"

Crofton turned his light along the wall. There was no opening.

"Damnit, they were right here, next to the stack of treasure chests," said Crofton. His throat seemed to be full of mud. "Purdy! That thing you call the glory hand — get it lighted up, quick!"

Purdy had found a match and struck it on the bricks. It flared away in a moment. He struck another. Shakily he kindled the five fingers.

"Now," he said. "But where's them stairs? Why ain't they there?"

Crofton was pounding at the bricks. They thudded, but did not stir.

"This glory hand worked once," Purdy was insisting. "You seen it work, like Mrs. Peddicoe said. It opened the way to the treasure."

Crofton whirled, and shrieked at Purdy.

"But it won't open the way from the treasure! It's no good!"

Purdy fell back a step. He blinked at Crofton. The light of the glory hand was growing dim, as though it did not have enough air to burn strongly.

"We've got to get out," said Crofton. "Wait — those dead men. Those swords they wear, we can use those to pick out the bricks and — "

He heard a dry *phlop*. Purdy had dropped the hand. Then Crofton heard another sound: the swish of twin sabers sliding smoothly from their scabbards.

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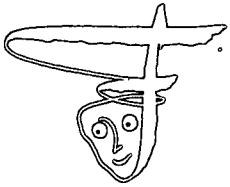

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